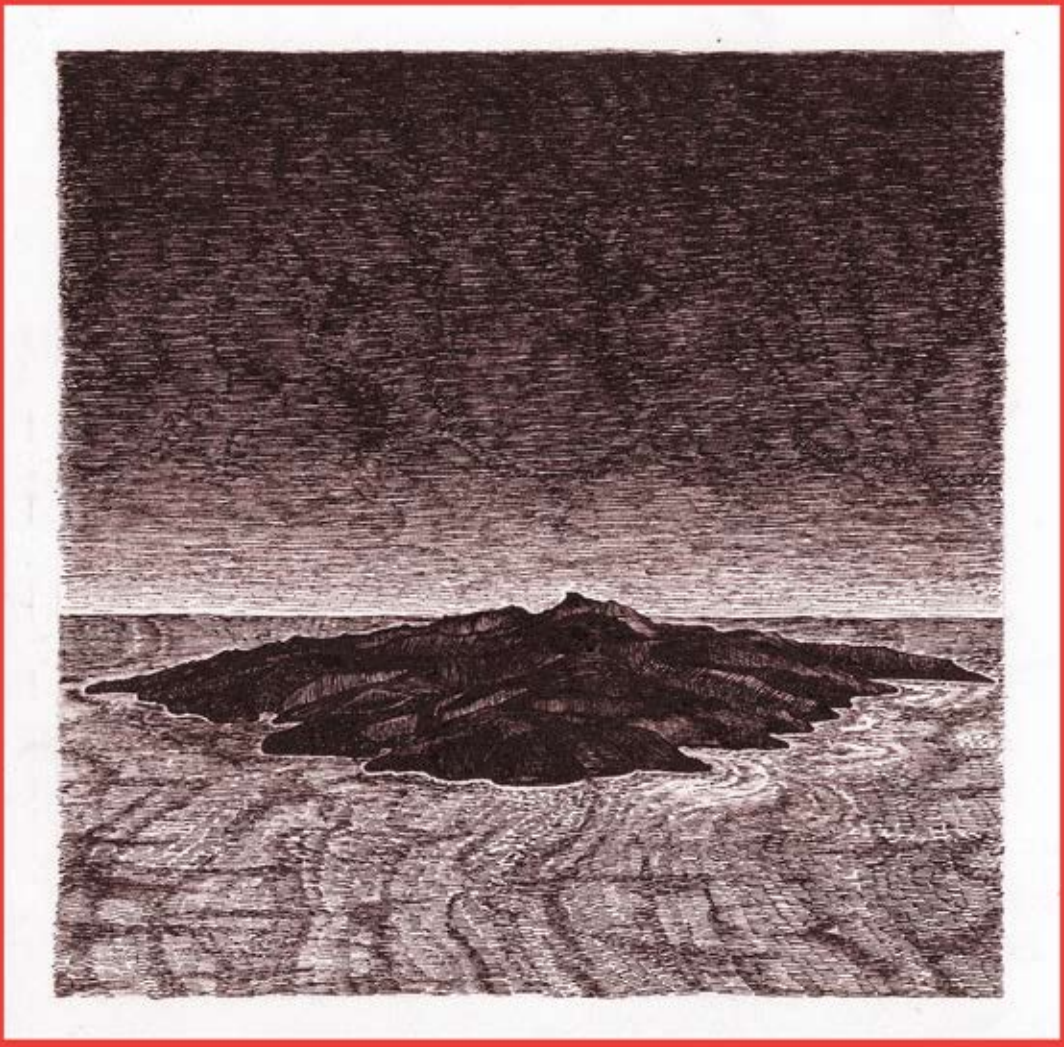
A Studious Use

Designing from the Undercommons



Giovanni Marmont

What if study was not about learning, improvement, accreditation? What if use was not about intentionality, function, ownership?

A Studious Use invites readers to reconsider the habitual logics and material priorities at play in practices of both study and use. It examines their potential and actual interplay, unravelling the ways in which these are at once shaped by and reproductive of broader social, political, and cultural currents. Here Giovanni Marmont explores how a seemingly inoffensive commitment to the terms of individuation, as a manner of understanding and organising the world first and foremost as an aggregate of separate entities, carries with it profoundly harmful implications. With an eye toward the unseen possibilities of social life, he proposes an alternative mode of engagement with and through artefacts – studious use – predicated instead on our general, shared, practical indebtedness. Through a blend of theoretical critique, philosophical inquiry, and experimental design practices, *A Studious Use* offers a rethinking of sociality not as a coming together of independent, if interacting subjects and objects but, rather, as a primary, undirected, ongoing collective experiment.

"How do practices dispossess us? How does use reorient the very question of function and form? Where else can it take us beyond our-selves? In this compelling engagement with use-beyond-use-value, Marmont takes us on a journey to a non-binary account of use that refuses the limited account of any marketable claim. Instead, it moves use toward the surprise of constellations as experimental as they are quotidian." – Erin Manning, author of *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*

"Beautifully written, intellectually generous and politically sharp, this is a stellar work of design studies. Marmont politicizes the often-depoliticized notion of 'use' within design discourse and practice. If taken seriously, this rare gem in the current landscape of design theory can potentially expand the horizons of what thinking and acting mean by and within designing." – Mahmoud Keshavarz, author of *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility, and Dissent*

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A Studious Use

DESIGNING FROM THE UNDERCOMMONS

GIOVANNI MARMONT

MINOR COMPOSITIONS

A STUDIOUS USE
Designing from the undercommons
Giovanni Marmont

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"How do practices dispossess us? How does the use that practice reveals redirect the self-centred choreographies of agency and intentionality? How does use reorient the very question of function and form? Where else can it take us beyond ourselves? In this compelling engagement with use-beyond-use-value, Marmont takes us on a journey to a non-binary account of use that refuses the limited account of any marketable claim. Instead, it moves use toward the surprise of constellations as experimental as they are quotidian. A sociality is crafted in the entanglement of how practice shapes an inexorable with-ness of life that moves beyond the one-two of subject-object, with use as the mediator. Freed of this tether, use is what grows relationality, in excess of any count."

– Erin Manning, author of *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*

"Beautifully written, intellectually generous and politically sharp, this is a stellar work of design studies. Marmont politicizes the often depoliticized notion of 'use' within design discourse and practice, unhinging it from the capitalistic and individualist assumptions propagated by contemporary neoliberal frameworks such as participatory and user-centred design. With care, playfulness, and intellectual rigour, he shows how use as practiced in the undercommons can open possible ways of engagement with the material and built world beyond ownership and property. If taken seriously, this rare gem in the current landscape of design theory can potentially expand the horizons of what thinking and acting mean by and within designing."

– Mahmoud Keshavarz, author of *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility, and Dissent*

We owe each other everything.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 2013: 20

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Acknowledgements

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The Invisible Committee suggest that 'writing is a vanity unless it's for the friend, including those one doesn't know yet'. It is in agreement with this sentiment that the first thank you I wish to extend goes to the known and unknown friends who have read or will read any or all of the pages that follow. Specifically, if this book project has taken the better part of the last ten incredibly eventful years, it feels like yesterday that my path crossed that of so many amazing friends in Brighton, whether on picket lines, in meetings, at reading groups, around dinner tables, in study rooms, or on football pitches. These friends have been alongside me ever since and always will be, whether in person or not. My eternal gratitude goes to them for having gifted me with the most generous, patient, and forgiving support: thank you most emphatically and from the bottom of my heart Garikoitz Gómez Alfaro, Joel Roberts, Lars Cornelissen, Jacopo Condò, Gabriel Wulff, Fearghus Roulston, Carla Ibled, Andrea Pregel, Marias D'Avolio, Eugenia Siccardi, Pierre Ellis, Sam Cutting, and Megan Archer, as well as Bryony Nicholson, Melayna Lamb, Chiara Bonuglia, Kate Newby, Struan Grey, Afxentis Afxentiou, Emma Harrison, German Primera, Melina Sadiković, Alex Esculapio, Merryn Haines-Gadd, Dora Souza Dias, and all the comrades in Solidarity Federation. You have been the most invaluable study companions: this whole work developed thanks to you and

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follow; to my brother Enrico, thank you for always turning the other cheek; to my extended family Jess, Hannah, Jeffrey, Jill, and Chris, thank you for all the help, care, and attentions you showered me with; and most importantly, to my partner and best friend Nikki, I cannot thank you enough for holding me up with such unparalleled kindness, for putting up with my nerdiness, and especially for all the little things making us smile and laugh which are "ours" without having a clear origin nor recognisable authorship.

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A Benjamin,

la mia piccola grande montagna.

Preface: Ode to the Assist

With Garikoitz Gómez Alfaro

For many, if not most, in this and other corners of the Globe where the drudgery of capital accumulation slogs on to the suffocating tempo of seven-day weeks, Fridays of course tend to be bearers of euphoric optimism. Like shooting stars, they shine quick and bright, briefly leaving us in awe in their wake. For us, for a while, a particularly cherished ritual accompanied pretty much each Friday in Brighton.

It usually started with a meme posted on the group chat 'Is footie on?', often poking fun at our generally unskilled yet unwavering love for a good kickabout. The call was thus emitted, gathering several of us only a few hours later on the unremarkable multi-purpose pitches of Preston Park (or in an even more unremarkable community centre during the winter months), around a ball, flailing our limbs around in shared undercommotive study. This was a weekly renewal of our practice of friendship through what was known amongst us simply as "non-competitive football". We can still hear the snarky comments coming from some acquaintances: "sure, non-competitive...". It was as if the very idea of playing football together without the need for some to win – and, therefore, for others to lose – as a *principle* or motive was entirely ludicrous, profane, almost a contradiction in terms. It's not like we did not ever (want to) score a goal. It's just that the goal, both figuratively and literally, was not the point, not our point. It didn't matter. Or, at the very least, it didn't seem to matter as much as what always came before it: the *assist*.

That is not only because no (ac)counting of the score was involved. It was this before, the opening and potential afforded by an assist, that we appeared to all be collectively after, more so than its eventual conversion into a goal (maybe save for the odd, exuberant own-goal a comrade couldn't help themselves from notching up from time to time). Indeed, it was customary to celebrate most assists, irrespective of side or authorship so very much including those by the "opposite" team, with even more abandon than goals. Importantly, this was regardless of their ultimate effectiveness, to the point that assists seemed to transcend the mere status of "last pass before the goal". After each session, laying on the nearby lawn or sitting at the local pub, it was quite rarely the case that we would recall goals with much excitement. By contrast, the peculiar choreographies staged by sometimes dextrous, sometimes silly, sometimes unconventional, sometimes surprising, sometimes disastrous assists would frequently elicit prolonged post-session commentary, hilarity, reminiscing.

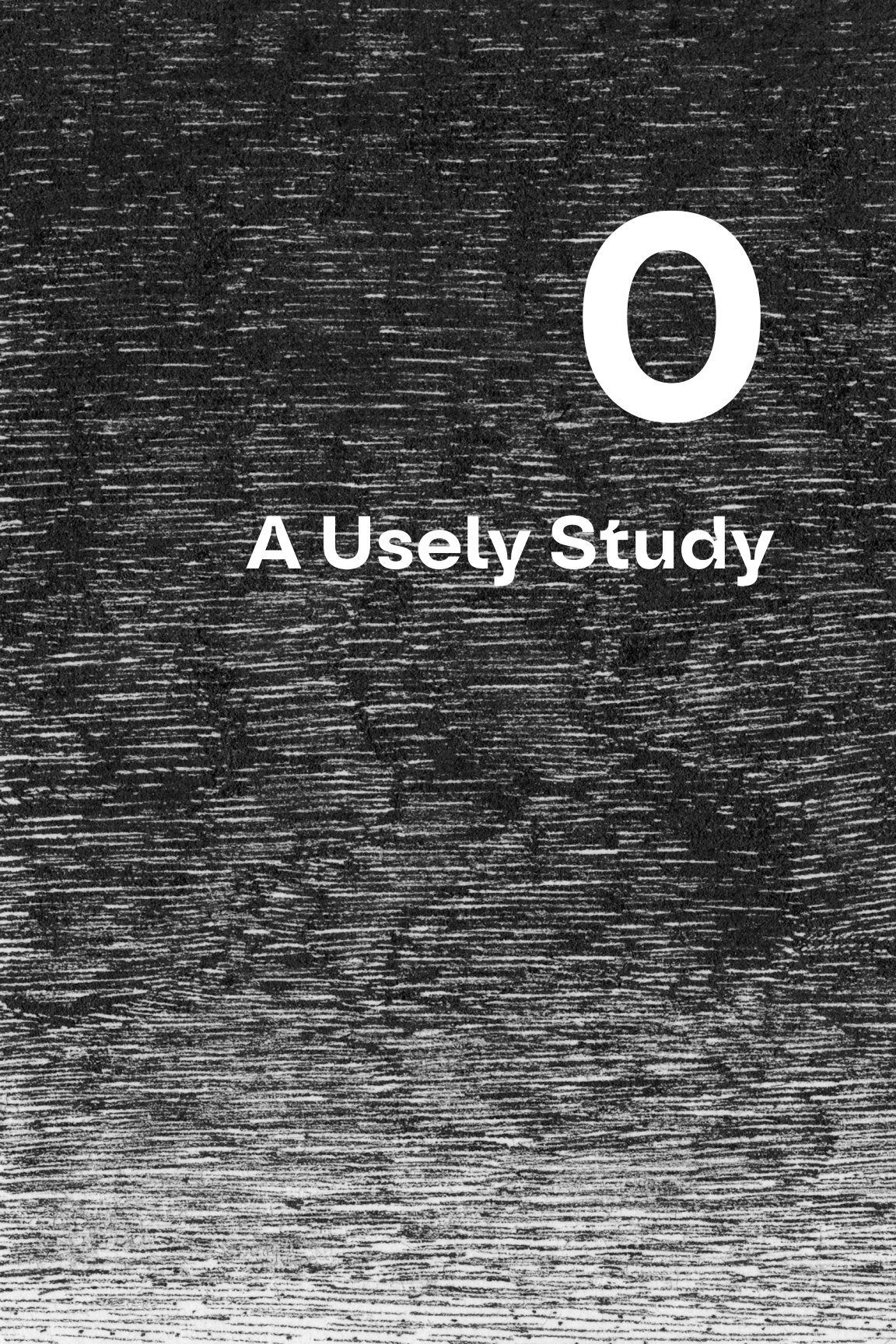
To be sure, such primacy of assisting over scoring was not properly a rule, but more of a shared and tacit disposition that got hold of us. It was very rarely the case that this had to be explicitly spelled out to novices joining us for the first time, and rarer still that competitiveness would persist thereafter. And while most players came from a relatively circumscribed network of friends, colleagues, visiting relatives, housemates, and organising comrades who were perhaps more intuitively receptive to this approach, on not infrequent occasions and provided we could all fit, we would welcome random passers-by of all stripes and age that asked to join us. When that was the case, we would limit ourselves to noting that "we like to take it easy" and not to try too hard at the expense of other players, trusting that they would either gradually adjust their expectations and attitude or not bother hanging around once the inevitable fooling kicked in. It was particularly fascinating seeing the odd, glaringly skilled player eagerly stripping themselves for once of an ingrained drive to prevail, mellowing out and reconfiguring their capabilities so as to attune to and serve this other mode of practising collectivity, without being told (how) to do so.

Such a penchant for assists therefore shifted our attention onto how best to become each other's means, rather than strategically moving towards an end. For example, whereas in competitive football a team would generally construct the action so that the player most likely to score would get the ball near the goal, our priority was often that of bringing into the fold of the action those of us who would otherwise remain at its periphery, whether due to confidence or to ability. Perhaps this is what won over comrades that either had seemingly taken an unspoken, maybe even unconscious oath against football (when not sports altogether) or were somewhat intimidated by it. "I can't play football!", some of them cried as we begged them to join us even just for a trial. "That's precisely why you *should* come along!" was our response, and not in jest. This hospital capaciousness was reflected in how the mode of our playing would at times adapt to a change in circumstances, such as playing "walking football" to accommodate the presence of a mildly injured friend who was unable to run, suddenly turning our very gait into an opportunity for corporeal experimentation.

Although we often reflected on what felt so magnetic about the way we played, at the time there was this ineffable quality to our practice that seemed to escape our earnest attempt at conceptualisation. Only now, several years later and with the potentially skewed benefit of hindsight, we have come to a tentative hypothesis. Like the anticipatory joy of a Friday evening, when the many possibilities awaiting ahead just about begin to take form, in their formless and exciting prematurity, perhaps it was this end-effacing art of the assist that we were craving to rehearse and witness all week. What we were committed to tending and attending to together. We repeatedly found ourselves pondering over why some seemed to "get it" and some didn't. However, again in hindsight, maybe it turns out that who got it and who didn't was the wrong question all along. Perhaps a more interesting question is: What kind of practice were we committed to act *on behalf of*? What kind of practice were we collectively possessed by, self-dispossessed through, so that any residual clinging onto the individuation of a "who" had to fall by the

wayside? What kind of practice were we summoned into through the collective use of a ball, a football pitch, our limbs, each other? What scene of use were we studying in, by way of those assists?

Alicante and Edinburgh, 2024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A Usely Study

What it is to be given (as) something to hold, always in common, has really got a hold on me. It's not mine but it's all I have. I who have nothing. I who am no one, I who am not one.

Fred Moten, Stolen Life, 2018: ix

...the personal is not just personal: the story of each of us, if we tell it true, carries in it everyone's story; and our collected stories carry in them the power relations of the whole society.

Andaiye, The Point is to Change the World, 2020: xl

The question acting as a throughline in the pages that follow is not one to be answered, it does not point to a problem to be resolved. Rather, this is a question to be looked after and militantly preserved,[1] as it were. It is, in other words, one to be studied: a question to remain troubled and unsettled by, but also enamoured of,[2] for as long as we can and as intensely as it is afforded by a general capacity that we can call "our" only by way of conventional approximation. And staying troubled, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, here demands the full warmth of our care, so that this tenuous question, this practice of questioning, does not congeal into deadening normative certainty: so that the question keeps flowing through us, overflowing us, gliding with enough thrust to carry us away with it, together, again

1 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation: Or, Usufruct and Use', in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 86.

2 'Answers can alienate or stupefy, but questions *seduce*. Once enamored of a question, people will fight their whole lives to answer it. Questions precede answers and outlast them: every answer only perpetuates the question that begot it.' CrimethInc., 'Against Ideology?', *CrimethInc.*, 2010.

and again. The question is that of *sociality*, that of the inexorable "with" of life, the originary and ongoing entanglement that "is not ours but it's all we have". Which is to say: it is the question of what we can and do feel when moving and being moved together, when sensing and being sensed, differently but in a shared act, to the point that the conjunction "and" suturing these couplets begins to feel redundant if not even wounding. How does it feel like, in those moments when whatever it is we mean by "myself" withers away and yet we are still and, in fact, even more exuberantly there, singularly plural, differentially inseparable? Those many moments of intense complicity when – more or less deliberately, more or less explicitly, more or less joyfully – we relinquish complete command over ourselves and end up blurring the boundaries between where "I" ends and "you" begins. Ubiquitous moments when, as suggested by Fred Moten's words in the epigraph above, we are "not one". With these considerations in mind, the pages that follow are *for* (prior to *about*) the collective, material, kinaesthetic experimentation with practices of social life that can and already do participate in a mutiny of sorts: a ruthless unmaking of the figure of the individual and the calamitous world it harbours.

WE, THE INDIVIDUALS

As we shall see more extensively throughout, the problem of individualism or, more precisely, of *individuation*,[3] as a source, process, and metaphysics of social fragmentation with a brutal, brutally enduring history and far-reaching repercussions, is a complex one. Part of this complexity is caused by the deceiving colloquial association of individualism with simple selfishness, with a form of egoistic,

3 It is worth noting right away that, in speaking of individuation, I am *not* directly drawing on Gilbert Simondon's work on this concept. Rather more unsophisticatedly, this term is here simply meant to indicate an interest in the *logic* and *processes* of attempted separation into bounded individuals (whether voluntary or imposed), more so than in the individual as the delusional outcome of this operation.

mindlessly utility-maximising instrumentality. But if these traits certainly do describe an important facet of the problem, they are also distractingly low-hanging fruits for any efforts to altogether do away with the individual *as such*. That is to say, they often serve a mystifying function by constructing the individual as a cartoonish villain, a Randian figure so grotesque that it becomes all too easy to disassociate from, meanwhile leaving unchallenged its more insidious expressions: "surely, I can be an individual without being an individualist!", some might object.[4] It thus bears stating in the clearest possible terms that *the preoccupation that animates this book is not the individual merely as a creature of greed and self-absorption*. Beyond these most obvious, callous, but often caricatured attributes, seeing oneself and acting as an individual also indicates a more general, deep-rooted, and seemingly innocent sense of self-possession: a sense of wholeness, private responsibility over, and ultimately ownership of, one's life and capabilities.

Moreover, far from being an abstract ideological condition, a solely discursive construct, the individuation this book is concerned with is something that we proactively *do* through the ways we are encouraged to conduct ourselves in our everyday corporeal practices, or indeed something that is visited upon us and that we are bullied into compliance with. Sitting on chairs, getting dressed, cooking a meal, hopping on a bus, listening to music, watching a film, reading (or writing) a book, drinking a cup of coffee, having sex, playing football, filling in a questionnaire, applying for a visa, going (or attempting to go) through customs...The specific content of these activities is somewhat secondary: whether alone or

4 As Carla Ibled highlights in her important investigation of the 'neoliberal imaginary', the inadequacy of this crass equivalence between the figure of the individual and selfishness was clear even to the ur-prophet of neoliberalism, Friedrich Hayek. Ibled writes: 'In his reinterpretation of classical liberalism, Hayek also denies that individualism means that human beings are fundamentally egoistic "in the narrow sense of concern with only the immediate needs of one's proper person" (Hayek 1948, 13). The "self" at the centre of self-interest may also include "family and friends" (1948, 13)'. Carla Ibled, 'Beyond limits: a psychoanalytical study of the neoliberal imaginary', PhD Thesis (Goldsmiths University of London, 2021), 140.

amongst others, the individual is that who tends or is coerced to interact with a world of subjects and objects perceived to be "out there", with whom or with which the individual engages as a distinct, intentional, self-determined, self-determining, and self-contained entity, while striving to retain and indeed assert control over itself – a schema fully compatible with ostensibly positive notions, such as empathy, or with what at times appear to be indispensable mechanisms of survival, such as forms of self-care. Moreover, and more dangerously still, the individual is that who expects all of the above from everyone else, too. This experiential sovereignty is in great part learnt and maintained by setting up clear physical as well as existential boundaries between the interiority of what is "me" and the exteriority of what is "not-me".

When this is the case, sociality must itself be intended as a sum of separate units, regardless of how and for what purpose these are arranged: individuals, as elementary particles, essentially pre-existing (and not simply in temporal terms) a social life that merely happens to them. When this individual says "we", then, what is often meant is an aggregate of "I's". Putatively independent entities thus come together through the recognition of common attributes, interests, desires, or even struggles – but often with the aim of further securing the means for sustaining and cultivating that same individuality in its many guises, rather than of dissolving and contaminating it. Of course, "coming", as opposed to "being" together, already begins to reveal the fault line here.

Conversely, being unable or unwilling to be an individual – to be independent or to yearn and work towards that independence – is presented as irresponsible and immature, when not as an altogether lesser form of existence: a burden, a threat, or, more generally speaking, an undesirable defect to be overcome, whether or not any moral disparagement colours this ontological call of duty. While all this might sound like a common-sense way of being, and perhaps to some even an appealing one, it clearly begs the question: who are these units that somehow come into contact, as if from nowhere, if not themselves constantly shifting, temporary configurations of

a general and primary sharedness that all organic and inorganic matter cannot help but partake and be implicated in? Conceiving sociality as the consequence of, rather than the precondition for, what only the painful inadequacies of our language may tempt us to describe as distinct life trajectories, thus obscures a dimension of fundamental entanglement given as and through a shared field of mutual interference – or, better still, of *intra*ference.[5] One that concepts such as interdependence or relationality earnestly try but ultimately fail to account for, as I will discuss in due course.

Now, if this logic of individuation circulates through countless conduits, so have numerous attempts been made – some of which feature more or less prominently in this book – to turn the profound social entanglement mentioned above into moments of deliberate collective experimentation. Attempts that, in other words, approach the question of social life as an aesthetic question or, better, as a question of *practice:* as something that we do and which, simultaneously, does and undoes us. This type of collective experimentation has much in common with what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have been describing and advocating under the unassuming and capacious rubric of 'study':[6] a practice devoted to the celebration, renewal, and cultivation of the many ways in which we are always indebted to "each other", so to speak, always 'shared' from the start, even if this shared indebtedness and indebted sharedness 'only comes to us in the flash of a match, of a smile, or a touch', as Harney reminds us.[7]

But if assertions of individual self-possession more often than not involve, are expressed through, and/or mediated by the handling

5 In highlighting this distinction between a logic of inter- and intra-, I am here following Karen Barad's important discussion of 'interaction' and 'intra-action', to which I will return later on. See: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007).

6 See: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

7 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Stevphen Shukaitis, 'Refusing Completion: A Conversation', *e-flux Journal* 116 (March 2021), 8.

of "stuff"– in keeping with the examples suggested above, chair, clothes, kitchenware, bus, radio, book, cup, bed(?), ball, pen, passport – if, in other words, individuation often hinges on acts of *use* of various kinds, then the very sphere of use itself deserves close scrutiny. Moreover, said scrutiny could – and, I believe, should – inspire an explicit foregrounding of the material *practice* of use as an important site for the studious experimentation with a sociality beyond, before, and against the logic of individuation, such as that invoked in Harney and Moten's writings. In other words, and to say it quite bluntly: *the practice of use might be reconfigured as a practice of study*. However, more so than prioritising use over study or study over use, the overarching intention here is that of identifying and celebrating previously unexplored points of convergence emerging between these two practices when both are delinked from the paradigm of individuation by which they are routinely ensnared – whether through a framework of agency and intentionality or through a logic of accreditation and self-improvement, respectively. Which is also to say, as I will further elaborate on later, that what follows is a case neither of applying the category of use to existing formulations of study nor, vice versa, of applying a rethinking of study to ongoing explorations of use – as if either of these two terms were a patch to remedy the other's conceptual or pragmatic inadequacies. It is instead precisely the *interplay* between, and entwining of, use and study that this book sets out to explore: the point where to use *is* to study and to study *is* to use. The point where and when we engage in a studious use.

USOLOGY

This compositional spirit notwithstanding, the initial spark igniting this investigation was a distinct interest in the sphere of use, or, more specifically, in this practice's social and cultural wealth, exuberantly transpiring from beneath a veil of humdrum insignificance. Yet, at this point I should probably pause and clarify what exactly is meant by "use", in the context of this book, and why I consider

this domain to be important. Of course, unpacking and addressing these very questions will be one of the central tasks of this work as a whole, so it is only through the progression of the argument that something vaguely resembling an answer might begin to take shape. Nevertheless, it is probably necessary to offer at least some embryonic clues now, together with a few key reference points, before venturing any further.

Something that must be noted from the onset, if anything because it is by and large what has sustained this book's fascination with use, is its strange conceptual and pragmatic ambiguity. Use: a polyvalent term that can point to something very concrete and very hard to pin down at once, both intuitively graspable and philosophically impervious, extremely specific and surprisingly generic. Think of the proximities and divergences between expressions such as, say, using a hammer, using a language, using the senses, using someone's help, using someone: we might say that use operates on multiple registers – at times overlapping, at other times ostensibly irreconcilable. With this in mind, rather than choosing a single perspective, let alone attempting to resolve the many tensions of which use seems to be the crucible, the present exploration will instead tend to float across such registers. Which is to say, in more direct terms: if, on the one hand, the use discussed throughout does refer to the concrete, physical, pragmatic *handling of three-dimensional artefacts* of various kinds, on the other hand the book also considers and indeed foregrounds the broader social logic or *terms of entanglement* [8] that can be at stake in use. The former aspect perhaps does not immediately require further clarification, although Chapter 3 will try to show how crucially limiting many common-sense accounts of everyday, concrete acts of use can be. For what concerns the latter aspect, however, some clarification is likely in order. This essentially implies treating use not only as an activity, but also as something of

8 In using this phrase, I am here riffing off Cedric Robinson's important discussion of what he defines as the 'terms of order' in the homonymous book. See: Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, (2016 [1980]).

a more general epistemic paradigm or, better still, as a *lens:* a prism that might allow us to notice and intervene on particular facets of the logic of individuation that this book takes aim at. In this sense, by centring use, by giving it operational and analytic priority, the book perhaps goes some way towards furthering what art critic Stephen Wright has called a 'usology', which he describes as 'an ambulant and approximate science, devoted to the study of uses and modes of usership'.[9]

Importantly, this pointed attention to use, this foregrounding and admittedly jargonistic appraisal of use's puzzling semblances, could lead us astray by giving the impression that what we are looking at is an exceptional field of action – a risk Wright is keenly aware of in his discussion of usology.[10] The opposite is true. At the most basic level, and as already hinted above, what warrants this book's focus is first and foremost the recognition that use is *not* special – a trait it shares with the mode of study Harney and Moten talk about, as we will see in Chapter 4. Use is indeed a practice that is not only humble, deceivingly trivial, thus tending to recede from view, but also always already going on. Rather than something we need to recover or invent entirely anew, use is instead a practice we are engaged in all the time and a fundamental terrain of social life in its own right. This is arguably one of the important lessons of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's late work on language and what he called "language-games", wherein use is nothing less than the basic form of, and necessary means of access to, meaning-making practices: 'The use of the word *in practice*', Wittgenstein writes in his *Blue Book*, '*is* its meaning'.[11] In this sense, use is the archi-

9 Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 64.

10 See Wright, *Usership*, 65. For the most part, as Wright acknowledges himself, cultural studies literature on what has come to be known as "the everyday", or everyday life studies, tends to suffer a similar fate, whereby the ordinary is met with an extra-ordinary scrutiny that extracts and abstracts it from its inherent situatedness.

11 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007 [1958]), 69, emphasis altered. Although any misrepresentations or

tecture or, perhaps more appropriately in Wittgenstein's case, the very 'grammar' of experience as such.[12] Literary theorist Rita Felski points much in the same direction when noting, via pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, that use might simply be 'the word that encompasses our varied and often unpredictable engagements with the world'. [13] Which is also to say, in Rorty's own words that Felski reports, 'all anybody ever does with anything is use it'.[14] However, as ever the devil is in the details, so to speak. Indeed, this primacy of use is a crucial insight that many pragmatists like Rorty tend to understand and misunderstand at once (or at least underestimate) when – unlike in Wittgenstein's more nuanced account – a compelling foregrounding of this practice is reduced to a liberal naturalisation of instrumentalism. When, in other words, use is confused with usefulness. An insidious, foundational confusion that, as further discussed throughout, is itself symptomatic of something of a paradox, which Felski acutely captures when arguing that use appears to be 'a constantly invoked yet rarely examined idea'.[15] Nevertheless, these perspectives can also assist us in reframing use, particularly when qualified as this book will attempt to do, as a key modality of our *general and generative entanglement*: use as a 'contact zone' staging the constant renewal of that very entanglement *as a practice*.[16]

A similar emphasis on the ubiquitous nature of use as practice famously animates the work of cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and, most prominently, Michel de Certeau. In his influential 1980 study *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau sought to take heed of the 'innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate

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oversimplifications of Wittgenstein's thinking on use are my own, I should thank my friend Jacopo Condò for his invaluable advice on this matter.

12 Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, 23.

13 Rita Felski, 'Introduction: Use', *New Literary History* (Autumn 2013), 44(4): vi.

14 Rorty cited in Felski, 'Introduction', vi.

15 Felski, 'Introduction', v.

16 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2019), 40.

the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production', which he went on to describe as 'clandestine' and 'microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures'.[17] Drawing in particular on the thought of fellow French intellectuals Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, de Certeau attributed to the 'dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity' and crafty appropriation (or "poaching") deployed in practices of use an implicitly 'political dimension', for these are the everyday means at people's disposal in their persistent resistance to power and its disciplinary strategies, as further discussed in Chapter 3. [18] Moreover, and of crucial relevance here, de Certeau considered use as *an art in its own right*,[19] the examination of which, however, 'does not imply a return to individuality' through the identity-based backdoor that is the figure of the user.[20] Rather, because in his study 'the question at hand concerns *modes of operation* or schemata of action, and *not directly the subjects* (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles',[21] de Certeau argued that 'use must thus be analyzed in itself'.[22] De Certeau's intention, which this book aims to extend and amplify, is thus that of granting use itself analytic/experiential primacy and, in so doing, resisting the lure of agent-focused accounts. To put it another way, what this shift of emphasis might unlock is the possibility of conceiving of a usology that is only incidentally about users, or what Wright calls "modes of usership". A usology that, when it sees users (if it sees them at all), it sees them for what they are: an exalted fantasy of claiming externality from *and* ownership over the inherent general collectivity of use, through notions of agency and intentionality, through what Harney and Moten have aptly defined as a 'subject reaction'.[23]

17 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013 [1980]), xiv.

18 De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xv.

19 See de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.

20 De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xi.

21 De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xi.

22 De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 30.

23 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Colchester: Minor

Now, in appreciating both the protean nature of use and its everyday socio-cultural significance as discussed up to this point, we might also begin to notice, in Sara Ahmed's words, 'how often use has been given the status of an organizing concept'.[24] Of course, the question of use has been a recurrent preoccupation in design-related theory and practice (which were indeed this investigation's point of entry and will be addressed more directly in Chapter 2), to the point that use has even been unconvincingly claimed as a 'realm that differentiates [design] from all other forms of culture'.[25] And yet, as soon as we start looking beyond design's self-imposed disciplinary boundaries and ambitions of exceptionality, it quickly becomes clear that a usology is in fact a necessarily 'sweeping field of extradisciplinary enquiry', as Wright contends.[26] From philosophy, politics, and jurisprudence, through biology, sociology, and anthropology, to linguistics, literary criticism, the arts, and beyond: it is truly remarkable to note 'how central use has been to many scholarly traditions'.[27] When 'pulling out use as a thread', whether this is explicitly thematised or not, we might begin to make 'connections that might not otherwise have been made across domains that might otherwise have remained distinct'.[28] This book attempts to do precisely this: it stitches together and composes with a motley assemblage of sources, each adding flavour and texture to an intricate usological tapestry.

In the understanding that use is a far 'more complex and capacious term than we have often held it to be',[29] this exploration therefore taps into an 'expansive archive of reflections on the moral, affective, cognitive, creative, and sensual aspects of use itself'.[30]

Compositions, 2021), 92.

24 Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 8.

25 Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Design Studies – What Is It Good For?', *Design and Culture*, 6:1 (2014), 15.

26 Wright, *Usership*, 64.

27 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 8.

28 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 8.

29 Felski, 'Introduction', xii.

30 Felski, 'Introduction', viii.

An archive that, if not quite burgeoning, in recent years has been undeniably enriched by a handful of very important "acquisitions", each of which has invested the sphere of use with particular philosophical and political currency – though none of which has fully and explicitly picked up its studious potential. Apart from Wright's incisive proposition, the most sustained and earnest exploration of use is arguably to be found throughout Giorgio Agamben's longstanding engagement with this concept. Use has become an increasingly central theme in the thought of Agamben, who will indeed provide me with the backbone for the reconsideration of use that this book elaborates in Chapter 3. Other recent examples of usological investigation, also addressed throughout, are represented by Harney and Moten's important foray into the Roman notion of *usufruct,*[31] Bhandar's appraisal of use and property rights in colonial enterprises,[32] and even more significantly, Ahmed's outstanding 2019 exploration *What's the Use?*, already mentioned above. It is worth spending a few more words here on the latter, as this will allow us to identify a decisive feature of this book's trajectory.

In her study, Ahmed draws on a breadth of examples – from Darwinian and Lamarckian biology, through Bentham's utilitarianism and educational techniques, to everyday material culture, disability activism, and university policies – coupling her distinctive theoretical sophistication with a genealogical assessment of the notion of use that is as wide-ranging as it is insightful. This way, Ahmed's meditations show how use becomes implicated in, or indeed serves as the basis for, a multiplicity of phenomena, ideas, institutions, and social arrangements, functioning in each case as the vehicle for the production, reproduction, and potential disruption of specific sets of values. And it is indeed a consideration of *value* – of what and who counts or is made to count, of what and who is valued in and through use, of how use normalises certain

31 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation'.

32 Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018).

value systems at the expense of others – that seems to be at the heart of Ahmed's argument. In other words, Ahmed ultimately characterises her usology as 'a conversation about the value [and the valu*ing*] of things'.[33]

This coalescing of use and value in the often-exclusionary logic of usefulness is similarly examined by Erin Manning in her latest collection of essays, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (2020), also highly influential to this study. Here, Manning further elaborates on her previous engagement with neurodiverse life and modes of perception, in an effort to disrupt normative expectations that 'take use-value as the measure of experience'.[34] Manning's move here appears diametrically opposed to that pursued by the likes of community art proponent François Matarasso and artist Tania Bruguera (through her elaboration of what she defined as *Arte Útil*, or 'useful art'), both of whom enthusiastically invoke, each in their own way, the unappreciated social value and usefulness of what is too frequently dismissed as merely ornamental, representational, or self-indulgent.[35] Turning to what she calls a 'speculative pragmatism',[36] Manning instead insists on championing that which is deemed to be useless according to neurotypicality's frame of reference – what appears to have *no use* – so that 'other ways of living become possible'.[37] Ahmed notes that perspectives such as the one advanced by Manning are part of 'a long tradition of affirming useless knowledge', itself seen as an antidote to narrow utilitarian imperatives and a rejection of

33 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 14.

34 Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020), 97.

35 François Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Stroud: Comedia, 1997); Tania Bruguera, *Arte Útil* [exhibition], Queens Museum of Art (February 2013). Something slightly different is at stake in artist-researcher Kathrin Böhm's interest in the 'usership of art', focussing on the use of art for (and as) public engagement – see https://www.andmillionsandmillions.net/info/.

36 Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 72.

37 Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 97.

instrumental rationality, 'sometimes predicated on valuing contemplation and the life of the mind and at other times predicated on valuing speculation and experimentation'.[38] And yet, Ahmed goes on to warn us, although not without its merits this is a tradition that can frequently belie elitist undertones: indeed, because the option of dwelling in uselessness is not equally afforded to all, 'often class privilege has rested on the gesture of distancing oneself from utility'.[39]

Their seemingly diverging orientations notwithstanding, a critique of the utilitarian slant on the formulation "value = use" (as well as its flipside, "use = value"), where "use = utility" – of how and why and where this equation gets mobilised – is arguably a crucial point of convergence of Ahmed's and Manning's projects. Whether we are alerted that 'to value use might require a change of values',[40] as in Ahmed's case, or encouraged to reconsider 'what is value beyond use-value', which is the 'core question' Manning is grappling with, [41] in both instances what seems to be ultimately at stake is an effort to *reconfigure* the coupling of use and value beyond its oppressively limited boundaries. If that is indeed the case, what I want to do here is perhaps to follow a different yet, I would hope, complementary route. This book thus attempts to *explode* the bond between use and value, leaving the latter term behind for good, so as to finally ask: is it possible to think and practise a mode of use entirely outside of its Marxian association with value? Or, somewhat turning Manning's question on its head, not to refute it but to deepen it: if we altogether sidestep the vaguely Manichean struggle between usefulness and uselessness,[42] what is *use* beyond (and before) use-value? What is use as a breaking of 'the compulsions of value that

38 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 232 n13.

39 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 233 n13.

40 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 37.

41 Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 12.

42 On the question of this dualism, it is interesting to note that Ahmed links *use* and uselessness, not *usefulness* and uselessness, to 'their cousins efficiency and inefficiency'. Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 101.

organize social relations' and which are the lifeblood of speculation of the financial type?[43] Which is also to say, what is use in excess of value, in defiance of processes of valorisations?

Engaging in what may well be described as 'a precise derangement of the sense of use value'[44] could be a necessary step in order to 'make use of other uses of use',[45] as Ahmed puts it. And making use of other uses of use could itself mean opening the door to other regimes of motion and perception, too. In other words, reconsidering use could offer fertile ground upon which to elaborate or, rather, to differently (re)join in what Harney has described as a 'collective organization of our senses'.[46] That is to say: to pursue modes of sabotaging, however fleetingly and intermittently yet never independently, the individuating experiential boundaries we are so accustomed to when thinking about use and, in the process, begin to 'transform the very infrastructure of our perception'.[47] Now, it has already been mentioned that, as Harney and Moten remind us, another word for this general sabotage, for this particular undoing, is study: the always ongoing, collective renewal of our entanglement, the way we are quite literally returned to, reabsorbed in and by, what is not just "me". However – or,

43 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016), 190. Let us also not forget that, according to Marx's theory of value, use-value emerges *together with* (if not even operationally after) exchange-value, as the birth of the commodity-form, rather than representing something like its independent adversary, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly observes. See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, ed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009 [1993]), 117.

44 Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, 'Music and Economic Planning', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 119:1 (2020), 141.

45 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 222.

46 Stefano Harney, Niccolò Cuppini, and Mattia Frapporti, 'Logistics Genealogies: A Dialogue with Stefano Harney', *Social Text* 36, no. 3 (136) (2018): 110.

47 Isabelle Frémeaux, Jay Jordan, and Gene Ray, 'Rural Riots, Animist Rituals and Teaching from the Territory: A conversation with the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination', *ISSUE. Journal of art & design HEAD–Genève* 18 (15 May 2023).

rather, because of this – study is also a highly contested practice. It is a terrain of struggle and, as such, it demands careful probing much like the practice of use does.

Indeed, contrary to Harney and Moten's articulation that this book takes up, a certain idea seems to have been drilled into our imagination which instead presents study as an essentially *acquisitive* pursuit: a process of internalization and accumulation of knowledge and skills that very much rests on and advances individuation. This inculcation has arguably been performed through the wielding of two tools in particular: learning and education. Consequently, snatching the practice of study from the individuating jaws of learning and education, but also rescuing it from the correctional yoke of the university, will be the first necessary steps in this book to reflect on, and experiment with, possible alternatives to both institutional sites and institutionalised *modes* of studious praxis. By proposing a specific focus on the ineffable intellectuality at play in practices of material entanglement, which is to say in the scene of use – something that still appears somewhat lacking from conversations on study, both conceptually and empirically – Chapter 4 will attempt to offer additional coordinates to already existing efforts of studying and understanding study otherwise. The studious use that this whole exploration gestures towards may assist a shift, always already ongoing, away from individuating registers of legibility and facilitate explorations of the corporeal dimension of study.

MULTIVOCAL INTERVENTION

Having introduced the two key elements that this book aims to intersect, as well as having provided an initial overview of the various tensions traversing use in particular, it is perhaps worth briefly reflecting on how this convergence has been attempted. Importantly, these are considerations that should not be confused with the exposition of a pre-existing and neatly ordered action plan, of which a studious use is some kind of result or outcome. In other words, this book is itself one of several interlocked components within a

possible instantiation of a studious use: it at once documents and directly contributes to a tentative enactment of the very practice of studying with, as, and in use.

This has been a multi-layered intervention involving an interplay between conceptual work and various forms of pragmatic experimentation. Indeed, just as a studious use is neither about studying in order to use nor about using in order to study, so the relationship between these registers of inquiry should not be mistaken for one of either causality ("if this, then that") or of sequentiality ("this first, then that", whether linear or iterative) whereby one component led *to* the other, as if they were consequential or successive phases. This is the classic institutional split compartmentalising "theory" and "practice" (but also, concurrently, process and outcome) that assigns specific roles to each:[48] the former is usually tasked with conceptual elaboration or appraisal, whereas the latter either tests out a hypothesis, produces information upon which to reflect, or materialises (i.e., stands in for) abstract formulations. To put it differently: either thinking leads to action or action leads to thinking. By contrast, Manning's idiosyncratic take on so-called *research-creation* can offer a more nuanced account of multi-register investigations such as the one pursued here. The term was initially adopted across Canadian institutions as a 'funding category' covering research that combines 'a creative, usually artistic contribution, and a written, more theoretical or philosophical one'. [49] However, as Manning contends, when the emphasis in "research-creation" is shifted away from the distinct role of each of the two components and placed instead on their coexistence given in the hyphenation that links them, this classification might describe a celebration of heterogeneity, rather than its synthetic dilution, starting

48 For three such accounts of so-called "practice-based research", see for instance: Linda Candy, 'Practice Based Research: A Guide' (Creativity and Cognition Studios, University of Technology Syndey, 2006); Maarit Mäkelä et al., 'On Reflecting and Making in Artistic Research', *Journal of Research Practice* 7, no. 1 (2011): 1–12; Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design' (London: Royal College of Art, 1993).

49 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.

from the recognition that 'making is a thinking in its own right, and conceptualization is a practice in its own right'.[50] When considered from this angle, Manning suggests that this peculiar confluence of research and creation furnishes 'conditions for *new ways of encountering study* – forms and forces of intellectuality that cut across normative accounts of what it means to know'.[51]

It is very much in this spirit that *all* registers at which the studious use sketched here operates – some of which tangible and others intangible, some language-based and others 'extralinguistic'[52] or somatic – are *both and simultaneously* theoretically fertile and practically generative pursuits. They are all informing and being informed by one another, coimplicating and complicating one another, jointly contributing to something of a polyphony, or a 'multivocality'.[53] In this sense, these various means of study are perhaps arranged much like an ensemble, for their combination is not defined through 'the distinction between the elements of the structure and its total form',[54] but precisely through the irresolvable tension between singularity and totality. I now wish to attend to a few specific aspects of some of the "voices" that can be heard throughout the pages that follow.

First, this intervention has engaged rather extensively in what Manning (via Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) describes as a 'practice of concepts',[55] particularly central to Chapters 1, 3, and 4. The task of this peculiar intangible craft has been that of sculpting conceptual propositions and setting them in motion, as it were, so that they could be generative of new processes by getting manipulated, displaced and replaced, discarded, translated, (re)interpreted and

50 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 28.

51 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 27 (my emphasis).

52 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 27.

53 See: Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 136.

54 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 55.

55 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 28. Also see: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 2009 [1991]).

(re)contextualised, paired and decoupled, made to improvise different roles while interacting with one another. Such conceptual work has hinged on drawing meaningful connections emerging within a constellation of existing perspectives and experiences dealing with use and/or study as practices of sociality, moving waywardly across several territories of inquiry and looking for enabling complicities in their intersections rather than focussing on obstructive flaws in their divergences. On the one hand, that this investigation has freely and unapologetically picked the pockets of various academic debates or intellectual traditions, sometimes clumsily and other times perhaps more skilfully, could be seen as an extractive mode of reading.[56] On the other hand, however, this theoretical pilfering, largely indifferent to disciplinary protocols and never in the service of a higher scholarly rigour, can perhaps be more generously interpreted by way of Harney and Moten's discussion of de-/re-contextualisation. In a conversation with the Spanish translators of *The Undercommons*, when asked about their take on the burgeoning circulation and potential shifts in context that translations of their writings inevitably enable, the authors express hope that their work 'continually moves and is moved so that it can be undone and redone, digested and reconfigured in and through contexts [they] had no way or right to imagine'.[57] A statement that Harney and Moten immediately follow up with an important question:

> What if it turns out that at a really fundamental level coloniality is an imposition of the proper, and of propriety, which critiques of appropriation advance rather than retard, all in the interest of a certain stillness, an inertial resistance?[58]

56 For an illuminating reflection on the topic of extractive reading practices, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *On collaboration within practice research | Fred Moten & Stefano Harney* [video], Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities, 10th November 2021, (00:33:30–00:41:02).

57 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, '"Conversación Los Abajocomunes" Interview by Yollotl Gómez Alvarado, Juan Pablo Anaya, Luciano Concheiro, Cristina Rivera Garza, Aline Hernández', *The New Inquiry* (blog), 5 September 2018.

58 Harney and Mote, 'Conversación'.

This inquisitive openness can perhaps be interpreted as a response to the kind of 'sharp division of all knowledge into disciplines and professions'[59] lamented by cultural theorist Masao Miyoshi. A fragmentation and segregation through which, Miyoshi contends, 'Each sector is mandated to develop exclusive terms and methodologies as if it could successfully seal its autonomy'.[60]

The emphasis has here thus been placed on finding 'surprising resonances' between various formulations, at times even in spite of the authors being brought into these tentative 'align[ments]', as Laura Harris might describe this way of proceeding.[61] In other words, the intangible props arising from this activity were not deployed as part of a *critical* practice: one that is meant to indicate the most suitable path, to articulate a more appropriate or meaningful perspective on this or that issue. One that, as Nick Montgomery and carla bergman put it, 'is supposed to reveal the limits of current struggles, discover the mistakes and flawed ways of doing or thinking' so as to 'generate positions *defined in opposition to others*'.[62] Moten is once again edifying in his caution against a stifling 'reduction of critique to debunking' which, he notes, has led academics to 'spend a whole lot of time thinking about stuff that they don't want to do, thinking about stuff that they don't want to be, rather than beginning with, and acting out, what they want'. [63] Not only can critical inquiry become a fatal distraction from the elaboration of ways of being, thinking, writing, and doing otherwise: it is also often the expression of what anthropologist David Scott describes as 'a solitary endeavour, the exercise of a singular, sovereign, and

59 Miyoshi cited in Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 189.

60 Miyoshi cited in Moten, *Black and Blur*, 189.

61 Laura Harris, *Experiments in Exile: C.L.R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1–4.

62 Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, *Joyful Militancy: Building Resistance in Toxic Times* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 26 (emphasis added).

63 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 120-1.

penetrating mind excavating the root of ills'.[64] Precisely due to this character, Scott asserts that

> it has proved difficult for critique to release itself from a certain formation and therefore to unlearn its will to power, its presumption of truth telling, its suspicion of narrative, its masculinist and imperial arrogance, its narcissistic drive to hear the sound of its own voice.[65]

In an effort to take a distance from this attitude, and given that what this book is after 'is not a new critique or new position, but a *process*',[66] it is not so much *reflexivity* that has guided this exploration. Rather, this book operates in a manner more akin to what Karen Barad (following in the footsteps of Donna Haraway) would define as *'diffraction'*.[67] Indeed, as Barad notes, whereas reflexivity entails the critical theorist's 'self-positioning' and gradual synthesis of various perspectives through the sharpening of a singular line of argument, a diffractive approach instead attends to and indeed revels in the heterogeneity that emerges when 'reading insights *through* one another' rather than against one another.[68]

It is with all this in mind that, I hope, one can understand this book's profuse, at times perhaps even excessive, citational practice: one deployed here not in the service of scholarly accuracy, so as to prove or disprove a point, or to genuflect to the altar of authorship (read: ownership), but precisely as the orchestration of a busy choir that might short-circuit the 'machine for individuation' that is 'acceptable academic style'.[69] This compositional practice is par-

64 David Scott, 'Preface: Friendship as an Art of Living', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 21, no. 3 (54) (1 November 2017): ix.

65 Scott, 'Preface', ix.

66 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy* 28.

67 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 29.

68 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 71–2 (emphasis added).

69 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'When we are apart, we are not alone: A conversation with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney', interviewed by Zach Ngin, Sara Van Horn, and Alex Westfall, *The Indy*, 1st May 2020 [online]. Moreover and importantly, it is also my hope that citations throughout this

ticularly inspired by the theoretical lyricism of Harney and Moten as well as that of Manning and Massumi. The way these authors elaborate on their poetic prose and use of concepts can be illustrative here. Harney, for instance, describes his approach to theory as a form of 'hacking concepts and squatting terms':[70] that is to say, as some sort of springboard that can serve to unlock new ways of thinking and moving. He then goes on to explain that what might be perceived as a repetitive writing style, due to his frequent revisions and rephrasing of the same ideas, actually functions as a deliberate effort to 'show that [one is] playing with something rather than that it's finished'.[71] On the other hand, however, a poetic approach to theory does not need to function solely as a practice of "unfastening". Massumi points out that, within the context of his and Manning's events planning with their *SenseLab*,

> Naming [concepts] is a technique for fixing the procedures, in the sense that you fix a compound. It gives you a practical handle on what region of potential you've collectively brought to provisional expression, and holds it together in a way that you can do things with.[72]

Conceptual work in the service of a studious use is thus simultaneously nourishing both the opening up of pathways for exploration *and* the provisional pinning down of ideas so that something concrete can be done with them.

Alongside this intangible conceptual work, the studious use proposed here has also involved tangible, conspicuously material modes of investigation. These could be accounted for in terms of two additional registers: a process of design-making, and a collective

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book are seen as acts of sharing, that this text can serve as a springboard for readers interested in further exploring some of the many threads addressed here, pointing them to as many resources as possible rather than assuming existing knowledge of or familiarity with these debates.

70 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 105.

71 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 107.

72 Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015) 170.

experimental event. Although more in-depth considerations of these elements are developed in Chapters 2 and 5, it will be advantageous to introduce them here below, at least briefly.

The first of these extralinguistic registers encompasses various forms of open-ended material exploration, prototyping, and prop-making. These design experiments provided a way of theorising via different means, mainly around questions of motional interferences and hesitations, generating operational propositions for acts of collective use. Starting with the observation of basic transformation processes through use – an opening padlock, a burning matchstick, a crumpled sheet of aluminium foil, an inflated balloon and so on – then drawing inspiration from kinetic art and other analogue motion systems, this register eventually culminated in the construction of a *kinetic machine* – to be properly discussed in Chapter 5. A key concern throughout was to avert the risk of turning the playful, artefact-mediated experiments being devised into tools for goal-oriented, reward-laden games: indeed, as we will see in Chapter 2, the inevitable instrumentality of this kind of activity can hardly be decoupled from the logic of individuation I am wrestling against. Design, and more specifically the designing and making of three-dimensional artefacts,[73] thus clearly represents a crucial field of intervention in this book. This is due to the fact that, whether superficially assumed or more carefully probed, a preoccupation with use is in many ways central to design practice, as already noted. And yet, it is important to underline that design – or, more accurately, design*ing* – is of interest here only obliquely, only as a proxy activity: that is, it is of interest not in itself, not as a discipline, but in so far as it affords a peculiar mode of engagement with, and access to, the scene of use. Understood in these terms, design practice is deployed here as an infrastructuring practice: which is to say, as

73 The book's pointed attention to tangible, three-dimensional artefacts is important to note, so as to avoid confusing generalisations that would disregard medium-specific considerations. This, however, is not meant to trivialise the potential relevance to the themes explored here of other design forms (such as graphic design and illustration design), but rather to allow for a deliberately focused discussion.

a mode of crafting material conditions of possibility for action, for use – something to which I will return in Chapter 2. Still, in recognising the importance that design has in this intervention, my aim is to situate the latter in dialogue with a broad tradition of making and material exploration that takes the terrain of use as a pivotal point of interest, as further examined later on.

A second extralinguistic register contributing to this intervention is represented by what I will refer to as a use-based study – or "studiouse" – session. Of the three registers identified here, this is perhaps the most complex to discuss, and it is for this reason that a whole chapter, Chapter 5, is dedicated to it. Still, a few preliminary notes about its nature and intent are in order, starting by defining the preoccupation that this element has with processes of social experimentation.

At the most basic level, this study session consisted of an event primarily revolving around the collective use of a sculptural structure with moving parts (what I describe throughout as a "kinetic machine"), but also involving reading of accompanying material, group discussions, as well as the sharing of food and drinks. Taken as a whole, the session sought to enable an exploration of sociality that might trouble, if only temporarily, the logic of individual self-possession on a motional and somatic level. Indeed, it was hoped that those taking part in the session could engage in an open-ended practice of studying – which is also to say, in a practice of devoting sustained attention to our shared indebtedness – mainly by way of collectively experiencing the kinaesthetic interferences magnified by the use of the machine. The mediating (or infrastructural) action of the machine, through the clumsy dance of use that this enabled, was therefore set to render phenomena of reciprocal interference and motional coimplication *operatively intelligible:* that is, to magnify them to the point of becoming physically perceptible regardless of any prior or subsequent rational evaluations. What mattered, then, was adamantly not to stage a conceited awareness-raising moment, snapping supposedly dazed users into consciousness: rather, the point was to corporeally *act out* and *feel* a

sociality beyond the individuating terms of intentionality and agency. Consequently, the studiouse session is not to be mistaken for either a *grand finale* of sorts or a data-gathering exercise, perhaps leading to an additional designing phase.

Neither contributing to an ethnographic study (i.e., the study *of* "participants" and their motives) nor to a usability test of some kind (i.e., the study *of* a machine to be improved), this session must be interpreted as an undirected, prefigurative experiment of studying *with:* studying with others, studying with the kinetic machine, studying with use. In the attempt of developing an instance of what Manolo Callahan might call 'convivial research',[74] this shift away from working towards a pre-determined outcome, so as to instead foreground the collective exploration of the very terms of entanglement being played out throughout use, begs a number of important questions to do with the politics of participation. How the session has engaged with these, and how the particular angle taken to do so aligns it or not with a rich tradition of so-called relational practices and participatory design work, is a matter to be addressed in Chapter 2. For the time being, though, it is perhaps helpful to point out that this study session was either influenced by or found common ground with a diverse set of perspectives and interventions, ranging from the revolutionary playfulness of the Situationist International and Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*, through kinaesthetic investigations of affect by Erin Manning's *SenseLab* and experimental dance practices such as Steve Paxton's *Contact Improvisation*, to the somatic pedagogy of the short-lived *nanopolitics group* as well as various ludic and collaborative approaches to critical and speculative design.

74 Manolo Callahan, 'Repairing the community: UT Califas and convivial tools of the commons', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 19, no.2 (2019): 376-77. Also see: Mette Louise Berg and Magdalena Nowicka (Eds.), *Studying Diversity, Migration and Urban Multiculture: Convivial Tools for Research and Practice* (London: UCL Press, 2019). I will return to the question of convivial research in Chapter 2.

BOOK OVERVIEW

Before we properly plunge into the thick of this exploration, it might be helpful to provide a quick rundown of how the book's narrative progresses. This is while keeping in mind that, as noted above, the rather conventional way chapters are compiled and arranged might provide a false sense of linear methodological sequentiality, thus deceptively casting the studiouse session reviewed towards the end as a representation of, rather than component within, the formulation of a studious use.

With that said, Chapter 1 lays the foundations of the argument by discussing how the logic of individuation proliferates, as benign common sense, permeating various and at times ostensibly incompatible articulations of social life. The chapter begins with an assessment of the figure of the individual and its key trait: the capacity to see itself and act as the proprietor of its own life – as a self-possessed, self-contained entity. If the consequence of this logic is imagining sociality as a secondary and supplemental condition, resulting in the abstract aggregate of pre-given atoms that we call society, we will see that rejecting this conformation along communitarian lines means gathering members possessing shared traits and interests, thus remaining firmly within the fold of ownership. A way out of this impasse may entail instead practising forms of collective self-dispossession, so to speak, that are here identified as a particular mode of friendship akin to what Harney and Moten have called the *undercommons*.

Driven by the already mentioned intention to not only rethink but also rehearse social life in these terms, the second chapter focuses on operational considerations, as it were, identifying design practice as a medium or infrastructural force that is particularly suited to support an exploration at the intersection of use and study. This assessment is carried out by examining key debates on use that can be found in design studies, situating the present intervention particularly in relation to critical and speculative approaches to making and pedagogic practices. The chapter then concludes by presenting an overview of design's socio-political commitments and

approaches to participatory practice, offering a series of reflections on related issues and complexities.

Chapter 3 confronts the first of the book's two key elements, undertaking a re-formulation of the notion of use and proposing a set of conceptual coordinates along the way. This effort begins with the recognition that what we routinely (and problematically) call "the human" is inextricably tangled up with technology, broadly understood. The latter is, in fact, not something radically external to the former, spoiling its originary purity or wholeness, but rather its very condition of possibility. This insight allows a foregrounding of the scene of use – the knot tying human and technological together – as absolutely central to processes of subjectivation and indeed "desubjectivation". Largely drawing on Giorgio Agamben's work on this theme, as well as on Sara Ahmed's more recent investigation, the chapter argues that use can be a far more nuanced paradigm of acting than what its colloquial acceptation might lead us to believe. The radicalised mode of use that this elaboration brings forth consists in a form of profanely gestural practice, disconnected from teleological horizons, and collapsing any clear distinctions between subjective "agents" and objective "patients" – between effecting and affected. Use thus emerges here as an instance of entanglement with the world: an event so fundamentally collective as to undermine any claims to ownership over one's acting and, ultimately, over oneself. This way, use is reprogrammed as an experience of self-dispossession, as an experimental practice of kinaesthetic sharedness.

The fourth chapter moves into intellectual territories mostly neglected by Agamben and which can guide the exploration of use's untapped possibilities, thus addressing our second core element: study. Indeed, it is here suggested that Agamben's use presents remarkable yet underexamined analogies to the undercommon practice that Harney and Moten have described as study. Just as Chapter 3 started with an undoing of functionality's instrumental hold over use, Chapter 4 draws on critical perspectives in philosophy of education to disentangle study from individualising tropes

of learning and education. The intent, however, is not so much that of showing that to use is *necessarily* to study, or vice versa: rather, the chapter points to a fruitful overlap between certain *modes* of use and certain *modes* of study. This in turn paves the way for the proposition, primarily inspired by the work of Harney and Moten, of some additional conceptual coordinates. What this theoretical convergence opens up is the articulation of a studious use, as a haptico-kinetic mode of growing evermore indebted to one another: a practice of noticing, preserving, and circulating a sense of mutual indebtedness, through an enacted consent not to be "one" – not to be an individual.

Chapter 5 attempts to put in play the coordinates mapped throughout Chapters 3 and 4 by means of a study (or *studiouse*) session. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part will resume the previous conceptual work with the aim of extending and implementing it within the context of a concrete instance of collective studious and usely experimentation. It does so by resorting to a series of concepts, primarily offered by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, that can jointly illuminate interrelated questions of curation, participatory action, and decision-making. Moreover, I will here review a number of kindred practices beyond design that, each from a different angle, similarly emphasise collective experimentation of sociality's somatic and kinetic dimension. The second part of the chapter chronicles the actual planning and unfolding of a study session. Retrospectively divided into seven "acts", as noted above the session involved bringing together a group of friends and a purposely built kinetic machine in order to explore corporeal instances of somatic and motional interference through use.

The book's Coda draws the journey to a close with a quick review of the whole exploration, followed by an attempt to reconnect the road travelled up to that point to the core questions sketched out in this Introduction. Two key points will be discussed. First, it is proposed that what has driven this investigation was partly an ambition to develop a mode of "designing from the undercommons" that could approach use not so much speculatively as *prefiguratively*. This

requires sidestepping the emphasis on futurity that both speculative design and education-based modes of study hinge on, embracing instead a different temporality: one that enables the immediate experimentation with alternative practices of sociality. Second, it will be argued that the type of studious use elaborated throughout might contribute to the ongoing formulation of a form of social poetics that can be collectively practised through artefact-mediated corporeal movement.

1

Not One

The moment you say it is mine because I worked it and improved it, or you say that I am me because I worked on myself and improved myself, you start a war. And by misattributing the initiation of this war to nature, you then codify this war as the (anti)social contract.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, Improvement and Preservation: Or, Usufruct and Use, 2018: 88

This journey, if not too bold to call it that, starts neither from a beginning nor, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might say, from the middle: it begins instead from the end – from *an* end. And yet, this far from inevitable end is one that is most frequently offered to us not only as *a* beginning, but as *the* beginning, *as well as the end*. In fact, it is an end that must pose (or, in Marx's terms, *appear*) as the undeniable beginning for the rest of its bogus narrative to hold – a holding that might well be pronounced "hoarding". This end is embodied by, or perhaps better still, embodied *in* and *as* a figure that not only claims to be a beginning as well as an end, but also one that hides this pretence, perfectly described by Immanuel Kant's famous formulation "end in itself", behind an amiable façade of triviality. Indeed, the apparent self-evidence of this end's originary status has been drummed into our imagination through centuries of concerted efforts cutting across the most diverse areas of knowledge and fields of practice, undergirding the very trajectory of so-called Western modernity in all its 'genocidal and geocidal' ferocity.[1] I am talking about – you guessed it! – the figure of the *individual*. This chapter, then, will aim to do two interrelated things: first, it will discuss some of the ways in which the figure of the individual is established, nurtured, and naturalised in practice and through discourse; and second, it will assess the tensions existing between

1 Harney et al., 'Logistics Genealogies', 106.

this figure and various modes of social life that either accommodate or attempt to displace it.

Now, the fact that an investigation of modes of sociality begins here with an appraisal of the figure of the individual might seem contradictory. However, this is not to corroborate the narrative of the individual and its status of foundation, of beginning: it is not, in other words, to abide by the terms of the individual as the primal unit, the elementary particle, the singular from which a plural can then emerge, the "being" coming prior to the "with". Quite the contrary, this is meant to (re)commence *our* narrative elsewhere and otherwise, but only after having stared this mythical lone entity right in the eyes and done away with the effects and consequences of taking it – either tacitly or explicitly, both discursively and materially – as the centre of, and precondition for, social life. Indeed, it seems to me that a dissolution, a piercing, a sabotage of the logic of the individual (a militant 'disruption of beginning') is necessary before the question of sociality can be thought and enacted anew.[2] Not for nothing does Brian Massumi contend that the notion of the individual – i.e., 'the concept of the self-contained, sovereign subject of modern thought' – is a prime example of what he calls 'zombie concepts', by which he means 'concepts that carry a presuppositional force of such staying power that they tend to return no matter how many times you slay them'.[3] But, I think, carrying on slaying this concept we must, everywhere it shows up.

Importantly, I should clarify that the pages that follow will make no attempt to retrace in any great detail a genealogy of the concept of the individual, as a political invention and cornerstone of liberalism, for at least two reasons. First, because a serious historiography

2 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 76. Note that I do not mean to suggest here that individuation is operative unless we consciously conceptualise it away. Indeed, as I discuss throughout, I am convinced that we do often live in tacit transgression of this logic, so my work merely aims to meditate on how that breach occurs, with what effects, and how it could be further intensified.

3 Brian Massumi, 'Immediation Unlimited', in *Immediation II*, Ed. Erin Manning, Anna Munster, and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen (London: Open Humanities Press, 2019), 502.

of this concept would also involve considering the philosophical trajectory of several related notions it is in many ways coterminous with: the subject, the Self, legal personhood, citizenship, sovereignty, but also Whiteness, Man, etc. Such an undertaking patently exceeds the much more contained ambitions of this book. Second, because a critical appraisal of this kind would also need to be grounded on a robust assessment of the political rationalities and fiercely contested ambiguities at the heart of not only liberal but also *neo*liberal capitalism, which would be equally beyond the scope of this work. Compelling efforts of this latter kind already abound (to the point that even naming a few examples would not do justice to the vastness of this literature), many of which draw on Michel Foucault's seminal work on governmentality[4] and the rigour of which this study could not hope to match, let alone complement in a meaningful way. Because of these reasons, I will focus here, rather arbitrarily, only on a handful of crucial traits marking this paradoxical figure: its fundamentally proprietorial logic, its tendency towards self-improvement, and its privatising or accumulative impetus. Indeed, this chapter's more modest intention is to show how these traits, *when and where* assimilated and effectively acted upon as governing principles,[5] are productive and reproductive of particular modes of sociality within the contemporary (and, I should add, mostly Western) context, whether as their direct consequence or, perhaps more problematic still, through some of the reactions that individualism engenders. Ultimately, it could be said that this review will have less of a diagnostic aim than a propositional one: not so much a "how did we get here?" – what Foucault might call a 'history of the

4 See: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008 [2004]).

5 It is important to underscore that I am not claiming here and throughout that *all* subjects are *always* constructed in this or that particular way, thus ignoring people's capacity for everyday acts of collective defiance – either through overt struggle or through informal deception and fugitivity. Instead, I will be focussing on those sadly frequent instances in which liberal and neoliberal interpellations are successfully received by interpellated subjects.

present'[6] – but, rather, a more exploratory "what now?" or, perhaps more pertinently, a "what else?".

To this end, the first part of this chapter will get underway by considering what some have argued to be a defining trait presupposed by the notion of the individual, namely its *self-possession*. We will see that this 'logic of possession', which Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou contend to be 'a hallmark of modernity' inextricably tied to 'the historical conditions of slavery', operates in concert with a constellation of interlinked concepts, such as, for instance, responsibility, independence, and freedom.[7] In the second part of the chapter I will address how, whenever and wherever we are effectively made to conceive ourselves and others as the exclusive proprietors of our own person, as individuals, the mode of sociality that ensues must be the legalistically-regulated coming together of right-bearing owners – as is the case in liberal-democratic bourgeois *society*. Moreover, we shall see how the ostensibly salvific notion of *community* that is often deployed to contrast this extreme, increasingly obvious, increasingly felt (anti-) social fragmentation, can easily lend itself to the fusion of the many into one that typically supports proto-fascistic rhetoric from across the political spectrum – when not swiftly devoured by hyper-capitalist recuperation, that is. With these complexities in mind, I will attempt to sketch out a mode of sociality grounded neither in a fragmentary sum nor in a homogenising fusion of elemental units, but in what we might instead call, under the auspices of Denise Ferreira da Silva's superb formulation, a 'difference without separability':[8] which is to say, an entanglement whereby difference neither presupposes an originary singular nor is resolved in and erased by a shared unity. This latter articulation, which Harney and Moten have been discussing

6 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975]) 31.

7 Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 7.

8 Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability', in *Incerteza Viva: 32nd Bienal de São Paulo – 7 Sept-11 Dec 2016 Catalogue*, ed. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças (São Paulo: Fundaçao Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 57–65.

under the rubric of the undercommons, will ultimately be linked to a practice of *friendship*.

Part I: One

A pervasive, seductive narrative seeks to present life as an individual not only as possible and pragmatically commonsensical, but even as appealing. There is really no shortage of examples.[9] Some are rather obvious, perhaps even comically exaggerated: the toxic exhortations of self-help, self-care, or coaching books, urging us to "focus on number one" and "not give a fuck", because we don't need anybody in order to be happy and a badass, often packaged as middle-class post-racial pop-feminist tripe; leadership courses and discourses, extolling the masculinist importance of standing out (while being a "team-player", mind you) in order to authoritatively marshal every soul on one's path, from family and friends to colleagues, whether in the pursuit of productivity or against it, whether in corporate contexts or under the Weberian guise of political charisma; the self-aggrandising rhetoric of influencers, TED Talk innovators, tech moguls, and other internet-based chancers and charlatans, advising us on how to best "actualise one's potential"; the cultural and creative industries' unwavering devotion to the sanctity of authorship and worshipping of artistic genius; the dressing up of exceptional athletic achievements and elite competitiveness with inspirational "you-can-too" everyday heroism; and so on. Other examples are perhaps more subtle, some arguably well-meaning even: the cult of wellness and clean eating, meant to be officiated through obsessive practices of enhancing and preserving the purity of the temple that is one's body; enthusiastic students' *desire* to be graded, so that the inviolable competitive laws of meritocracy can follow their partitioning course and they can get better accessed by the job market;

9 An insightful archive of some of these, collected under the banner of a 'confidence imperative', can be found in Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2022).

everyday unqualified championing of all that is quirky, idiosyncratic, or unconventional, not in defence of difference but in the service of a right to uniqueness, whether this is part of genuinely defiant efforts against the tyranny of normativity or cynically co-opted by the crass camaraderie of brands inviting you to "just be you"; academic fellowships which, in spite of what the name suggests, paradoxically reward scholars with 'access to solitude', as Harney and Moten have accurately observed;[10] scabbing; etcetera. Moreover, it is perhaps not unusual, as we attempt to cope with the conditions visited upon us by the socio-economic predicament we live in, to recognise ourselves in some of the stereotyped vignettes reported above. Not only this should hopefully make it clear that none of the above is meant as cheap finger-pointing. It is also to signal how the very act of extricating or attempting to extricate "oneself" from these dynamics can, in fact, point to one of the purest, most common, most well-intentioned acts of individuation: the quintessentially bourgeois effort to be "a good person" [11] – i.e., that moralising assault on social life that promises individual salvation from the ills of the world (climate collapse, poverty, systemic violence, racism, etc.) to those who can somehow individually untangle themselves from the workings of that same world, thus demonstrating righteousness by disassociation.

Meanwhile, perhaps as a necessary flipside to this triumph of collective individuation, vilifying the various forms of dependence in which are most visibly yet not exclusively enmeshed those incapable, systemically incapacitated, or even unwilling to individually "stand up for themselves" – those Ferreira da Silva may speak of as 'affectable'[12] – seems to have become a popular sport of sorts. Just

10 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'the university: last words', (unpublished, 9 July 2020), 4.

11 For a similar point, also see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *Stefano Harney and Fred Moten – Propositions for Non-Fascist Living – Video Statement – October 2017*, Propositions for Non-Fascist Living, 2017b, 08:58-09:30.

12 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Ferreira da Silva counterposes the 'self-determining' and 'transparent' subject of The Enlightenment to its radical

glancing at the UK context, the undeserving benefits scrounger, the illegal immigrant, and the underachieving student are but some of the most egregious dog-whistles we are force-fed on a daily basis by media pundits and politicians. Of course, this is itself but another mode of individuation, and as much as the ones listed above can all seem rather extreme cases, they are nevertheless frequent enough and sufficiently illustrative of certain hyper-individualising material and practical conditions of existence in the so-called Global North and beyond. Additionally, as popular uprisings of all sorts continue to challenge the social order, profoundly anti-collectivist, elitist, and ultimately reactionary sentiments routinely lead to the demonisation of crowds as "mindless mobs", wherein individual rationality supposedly becomes enslaved by so-called groupthink through what paleo-fascist social psychologist Gustave Le Bon decried (and sought to weaponise) as 'deindividuation'.[13] More generally speaking, a key point that cannot be overstated and which I hope the reader will bear in mind throughout the whole book is that thinking of ourselves and acting as self-possessed individuals, no matter how privately harmless this might feel, tends to *come with the expectation that everyone else around us will do (and will be able to do) the same*. Taking such an atmosphere as our starting point, I shall seek to determine how propertiedness can be read as the key common denominator of what described above.

LIFE AS PROPERTY

The socio-cultural and political centrality that ideas of property can occupy not only in discussions of class, inequality, and

non-European 'affectable other'.

13 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003 [1895]). The enduring influence – whether acknowledged or not – of Le Bon's thesis in everyday discourse amongst today's conservatives and liberals alike cannot be understanded. The present book sees rather favourably deindividuation and many of its connotations which instead troubled Le Bon.

economic-based power relations, but also in accounts of, and struggles over, questions of identity, subjectivity, and personal freedom has been registered across multiple intellectual traditions. For example, a sophisticated debate at the intersection of legal theory, moral philosophy, and political theory (mostly adopting an analytic framework) has developed around the conceptual stickiness of terms such as self-ownership, possessive individualism, and property in the person. Thinkers such as G.A. Cohen and more recently Carole Pateman, for instance, have been closely scrutinising these terms' distinct intricacies, highlighting logical fallacies and potential differences between them, and addressing questions around autonomy and the alienability or inalienability of the property that the Lockean individual was held to have in its person.[14] Another assorted set of theorists, some of whom I will engage with more consistently throughout the book, has instead specifically attended to the racial and colonial connotations and legacies of property-based (legal) formulations of subjectivity, and particularly to their association with ideas of whiteness and freedom.[15]

However, if we are to understand the significance of the synergy binding the notion of the individual together with that of possession to such an extent that 'subjectivity is *defined* by the subject's possession of itself',[16] as Moten asserts, I believe there is no better

14 See: G.A. Cohen, *Self-ownership, freedom, and equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Carole Pateman, 'Self-Ownership and Property in the Person: Democratization and a Tale of Two Concepts', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no.1 (2002): 20–53. Admittedly heedless of the nuances furnished by these interventions, the three denominations (possessive individualism, self-ownership, property in the person) will be here used somewhat interchangeably, so as to not further burden my analysis.

15 Four notable examples not yet cited being: Cheryl Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review* 106, no.8 (1993): 1706–91; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Robert Nichols, *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020); Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018), 87-106.

16 Moten, *In the Break,* 1 (emphasis added).

place to start from than C.B. Macpherson's classic 1962 study *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Through his genealogy, Macpherson sought to present a critique of liberal individualism that would not be content with what he saw as superficial chastisements of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, by some simply deemed guilty of an *excess* of selfishness, in order to then recover otherwise 'desirable values of individualism'.[17] That is to say, Macpherson's diagnosis is not concerned with issues of magnitude, with the crossing of something like a moral threshold beyond which we witness 'a perversion of the fundamental liberal insight of an earlier tradition'.[18] Rather, what he meant to call into question was the idea itself of 'the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities'[19] that lies at the very heart of liberal-democratic theory.

Individualism's 'possessive quality', [20] Macpherson tells us, has its formal conceptual roots in the thought of seventeenth century Enlightenment political philosopher John Locke – who, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, famously postulated that 'every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*'[21] – but also, before him, in the English

17 C. B Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2011 [1962]) 2-3. It is perhaps appropriate to point out, if only in passing, that Bentham's utilitarian doctrine is not universally recognised as being individualistic. The already-mentioned G.A. Cohen for example contended that Bentham was indeed preoccupied with utility maximisation, but at the scale of society *as a whole* and that, therefore, 'because of its aggregative character, utilitarianism is insensitive to the fate of the individual'. See Cohen, *Self-ownership*, 87. Bentham's main disciple, John Stuart Mill, was certainly at pains to distinguish between deplorably selfish individualism and morally inviolable individuality – an effort not worthy of much consideration here, as far as I am concerned. While 'over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign', we read in his *On Liberty*, Mill goes on to assert that 'in proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others'. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003 [1859]), 81; 127–8.

18 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 2.

19 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 3.

20 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 3.

21 John Locke, 'The Second Treatise of Government', in *Two Treatises of Government*, Ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988

Civil War political movement known as the *Levellers*, and in Thomas Hobbes' model of the social contract.[22] It is therefore from the conception of the individual found in the work of these thinkers that Macpherson begins to construct his theory of possessive individualism as the great integral fallacy inherited by contemporary liberal democracies. What Macpherson shows through his account is that the doctrine of the self-possessed individual not only guided a set of economic and political operations. Rather, he claims, it effectively proposed a proper metaphysics – or an "individualist anthropology", as jurist Pietro Barcellona later defined it.[23] Indeed, within such a framework, a subject's humanity ends up depending entirely on the essentialisation and universalisation of this supposedly chief "quality": the individual's 'capacity as proprietor of his own person'.[24] To put it bluntly: no self-possession, no human being. Or, even more drastically and beyond this problematic humanist terminology, 'for every one as he is himselfe, so he hath a selfe propriety, *else could he not be himselfe*', as prominent Leveller Richard Overton worded it in his 1646 pamphlet *An Arrow Against all Tyrants*.[25]

The scope of this proposition must not be understated. Indeed, if we might contend, after Barcellona, that 'in modernity, the subject presents itself with the quality of proprietor [*proprietario*]',[26] this claim should not be taken to represent yet another trite critique

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[1690]), 287, §27.

22 Macpherson's genealogy might be not only expanded but also significantly extended, reaching as far back as to include the Roman notion of self-mastery that differentiated a free (self-possessed) citizen from a slave (by definition possessed by a master), as highlighted by Locke scholar James Tully. See James Tully, 'After the Macpherson's thesis', in *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 81.

23 Pietro Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987) 12. All English translations of this text are my own.

24 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism,* 271. Note that the gendered, masculinist figuration of the propertied subject is here not accidentally retained, hopefully for reasons that do not require spelling out.

25 Overton cited in Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism,* 140 (emphasis added).

26 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 79.

of consumerism, simply decrying widespread material greediness and obsession with the acquisition of commodities. Possessive individualism, when at work, operates at a much deeper level by construing *life itself* as private property. This means that simply stating that the whole existence of the individual is inextricably tied to its possession of material goods still does not allow us to grasp the full reach of this propertarian doctrine. Rather, the logic of possession that underpins this form of individualism extends to the point that, according to Butler and Athanasiou, 'property relations have come to structure and control our moral concepts of personhood, self-belonging, agency, and self-identity'.[27] Further reinforcing this point, Cohen clarifies that the self- in the term self-ownership (which he opted for over Macpherson's possessive individualism) 'has a purely reflexive significance. It signifies that what owns and what is owned are one and the same, namely the whole person'.[28] Accordingly, if it is entirely uncontroversial for individuals to consider themselves as *having* experiences,[29] as *having* rights, as *having* relationships, as *having* thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as possessing certain traits or attitudes that are somewhat private, beyond all these being merely linguistic expressions, this is because it is first and foremost the property of one's own *being* that is at stake in this mechanism. This way, Barcellona writes, 'property ceases to be a personal feature and becomes *a form of subjectivity in and of itself*'.[30]

Through the logic of the propertied individual, each subject is thus relentlessly invited to – both discursively and performatively, and certainly in heterogeneous and fragmentary ways – engage in what Moten very fittingly labelled 'castle-thinking':[31] that is to say, the subject's ability to see itself and act first and foremost as 'the king

27 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 13.

28 Cohen, *Self-ownership*, 69.

29 Anonymous, 'Call / Appel', (s.l., 2003) 39.

30 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 37 (emphasis added).

31 Fred Moten, 'Blackness and poetry', *Mixed Blood Project*, 18 March 2015, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA. [Public talk] , 00:26:53.

of his castle'.[32] A castle that is now to be intended as the subject's very existence. This way, each individual is the target of an assorted pattern of interpellations and injunctions urging it to present itself as a *sovereign* entity: one that, even while unambiguously tangled up in a web of dependencies and demands for competition, can (and should) nevertheless and at the very least claim to have 'exclusive control of (rights in) his own person'[33] – control of "his" *being* "himself". This is the fraudulent sleight of hand implemented by the so-called social contract: that lousy usurpation that, while parading as the death blow to tyranny, actually extends the latter's despotic impulse through something of a distributive process that Angela Mitropoulos so aptly described as the 'proliferation and democratization of sovereignty'[34] – i.e., everyone a self-determining subject, everyone a King (as well as a 'Priest and Prophet',[35] for good measure, according to Overton).

Now, this idea of self-possession has arguably grown so uncontroversial in everyday discourse and practice that one might likely

32 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 172.

33 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 263.

34 Angela Mitropoulos, 'Oikopolitics, and Storms', *The Global South*, 3, no.1 (Spring, 2009): 68. Also see: Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion: from biopolitics to oikonomia* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2012); Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 87–8. We might ask here: why does it matter what individuals think themselves to be, in "private"? But of course, this castle-thinking attitude is only outwardly a private issue (if there could ever be such a thing). The problem, or at least one of the problems, is that soon enough the democratisation of sovereignty, which gives birth to the self-possessed individual, begins manifesting itself through a concomitant 'democratisation of *policy*' too, as Harney points out, whereby 'more and more people think they can [and must] take it upon themselves to diagnose what's wrong with other people' – see Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Manuel Callahan, and Annie Paradise, 'Virtual Koerner's: Moten, Callahan, Ferreira da Silva, Harney, and Paradise in Conversation', *Virtual Koerner's seminar series, UBC Latin American Studies*. 25 September 2020 [online talk, 00:37:19]. Elsewhere, Moten has argued that a democratisation of sovereignty represents one of what he sees as the 'three primary pillars that constitute our modernity', together with the slave trade and settler colonialism – see Moten, 'Blackness and poetry' [00:24:16]; but also Fred Moten, Blackness and Poetry, *Evening Will Come*, 55, no.1 (2015).

35 Overton cited in Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism,* 141.

wonder, with Pateman, 'Who does not want a significant say in their own life, to be able to pursue their own goals, to have freedom from interference, and control over their actions?'[36] But what I hope this book will be able to show throughout, thereby contributing to broader and longstanding efforts in such showing, is that rejecting the framework of self-possession is decidedly not equivalent to an endorsement of subjugation.[37] Quite the opposite, as we shall see, it is exhortations to and performances of propertied individuation that are bound up with an assorted repository of miseries. Philosopher Marina Garcés, for one, has further elaborated on Barcellona's analysis of propertied subjectivity to address its profound implications for collectivised modes of action. She contends that this 'extreme privatisation of individual existence',[38] which is initially instituted as and through the juridico-political device of right-bearing legal personhood, eventually results in the abstraction of each individual from 'any shared dimension of life' at the experiential and *somatic* level.[39] Importantly, however, for Garcés a complying response to this mode of self-possessive interpellation does not precipitate individuals into absolute solipsism but rather draws them into a condition of thoroughly common, if not indeed globalised, existential impermeability – a way of being separately together.[40] I will return to this apparent paradox later on, but what is worth lingering on here are, first, the very logic of property itself and, second, how this translates into a corporeal dimension of self-possession, which Garcés rightly draws our attention to.

At a very fundamental level, we might say that property amounts to and enacts an exclusion. More precisely, as we can

36 Pateman, 'Property in the Person', 24.

37 On this point, also see Cohen, *Self-ownership*, 230.

38 Marina Garcés, *Un mundo común* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2013) 28. I am indebted to Garikoitz Gómez Alfaro for assistance with the translation of all passages from this book.

39 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 28.

40 See: Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negations of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011 [2002]).

learn from a recent and brilliant book by Robert Nichols titled *Theft is Property!*, property is predicated upon a '*relation* of exclusion'.[41] Indeed, Nichols contends, 'to assert property in something is to make an enforceable claim to exclude someone from access to some thing', whereby the "thing" to which access is being withdrawn can but needs not be 'a particular kind of object' or a 'physical entity'.[42] Nichols' perspective illuminates a crucial aspect of property – already cleverly suggested by the title's inversion of the famous anarchist refrain "property is theft", popularised by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: property and property-based relations must be *made*, so property is the *end result* of a process – a process of appropriation or, better still, of 'propertization'[43] – rather than a precondition. Which is also to say: if we might be most intuitively accustomed to thinking of theft as a violation of ownership, as a 'privation of possession',[44] whereby the two elements (theft and property) are very much engaged in an antagonistic relationship, so to speak, Nichols instead invites us to understand *property as that which theft creates*. And conversely, in keeping with this line of argument, theft names the process of transformation of 'nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones':[45] it is 'the mechanism and means by which property is generated'.[46] As Harney and Moten powerfully put it, then, 'the first theft shows up as rightful ownership', as a severing off of some thing – such as the individual – from a primitive, general conditions of sharedness.[47]

To be sure, in his book Nichols is primarily attempting to indicate a possible way out of a particular quandary that most notably Indigenous anti-colonial struggles are confronted with: that is, how

41 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 31.

42 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 31.

43 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 8.

44 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 6.

45 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 8.

46 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 9.

47 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 13.

to claim that something has been stolen and must be returned – land, in this case – without ending up endorsing the same exclusionary logic of property that they might ultimately want to oppose?[48] Still, I want to argue here that a similar mechanism is at work in processes of individuation: which is to say, in the making of individuals. And if individuation or the making of the individual, as I am trying to propose, amounts to the making of a peculiar form of property in the way described by Nichols, one of the primary terrains upon which this propertising thievery takes place is *the body*. Indeed, is it not the notion of the body the primary device – at once rhetorical and biological – which is meant to make the individual visible as such, which shelters or imprisons the individual, which purports to be irrefutable material evidence of that same unbridgeable gulf amongst distinct beings that, in fact, it itself instantiates? (And, by extension, is it not the idea of "embodiment" how the individual survives the flagrant nonsense that is the Cartesian cogito [abstracted consciousness] *as an individual*, how we cannot let go of a metaphysics of separation even [more so] as we invoke uncritical notions of relationality?) Now, it should go without saying that questioning the role that the body plays in assertions and performances of self-possession is in no way meant to undermine the importance of *strategically* invoking the same notion within vital struggles past and present against control and domination, hinging for example on advocating so-called body autonomy – far from it! It is rather to draw attention to the serious direct and unintended pitfalls of leaning wholeheartedly on the category of possession as an unproblematic shield against intersecting matrices of oppression. It is to point to the vast range of coercive technologies that do rely

48 Nichols notes that at least two serious problems arise, in settler-colonial contexts, when demands such as land restitution are articulated as property-oriented claims of rightful ownership: first, these must recast the land itself as an object that can be owned – something in sharp conflict with many Indigenous ethics and cosmologies; second, adopting a somewhat "nativist" approach can be 'politically problematic for its implications on other, non-Indigenous communities', most notably non-white communities. Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 6–7.

on the very separability that a body, *the* body, *my* body inevitably helps to establish.

That the category of the body, as the 'recognizable vessel of a self-possessing individual', [49] can function as a pernicious exclusionary apparatus is an insight that comes to us from a variety of intellectual currents. For example, concerns with the imposed limitations and boundaries of the individual body have clearly been central to much work in critical disability studies and explorations of neurodivergence, both of which illuminate the discriminatory and disabling effects produced by normative fantasies of unfettered control and corporeal discipline.[50] Moreover, much like biologists today seem to agree that "our" bodies – "our" microbiomes – are actually busy crucibles of organic matter in equal measure human and nonhuman, theorists of affect too have long been problematising understandings of the body as a private sphere of sensorial boundedness.[51] This type of work alerts us to the many ways in which intending the somatic as a domain not of porosity and constant contamination but of utter impermeability leads to overlook what 'arise[s] in the midst of in-between-ness',[52] thereby

49 In a beautiful essay on performance art, André Lepecki similarly draws attention to the individualising problem posed by the humanist concept of the body – to which he prefers a notion of "corporeality" indebted to Hortense Spillers' famous discussion of "flesh". See: André Lepecki, 'Performance and Corporeality: Suspensions of the "Human"', in *Points of Convergence - Alternative Views on Performance*, ed. Marta Dziewańska and André Lepecki (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2017), 15–27.

50 E.g., see Jos Boys, *Doing Disability Differently: An alternative handbook on architecture, dis/ability and designing for everyday life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Erin Manning, 'Me Lo Dijo un Pajarito Neurodiversity, Black Life, and the University as We Know It', *Social Text* 36, no.3 (September 2018): 1–24.

51 Amongst many others, see: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010) 112; Lisa Blackman, *The Body: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg, 2008); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

52 Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

disregarding all that exceeds or 'transgresses individual perspectives and frames of reference'.[53] Arguably of still greater gravity is the central function performed by the body in constructions of Whiteness and the colonial subject, as forcefully underscored by philosophical and juridical theories of race. Indeed, if legal scholar Cheryl Harris has shown that property shares with whiteness 'a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude',[54] historically this synergy has been first and foremost manifested through formal ownership over one's body.[55] However, I would be only stating the obvious here, were I to simply acknowledge that the slave was not afforded the "privilege" of bodily ownership implied by legal personhood: rather, as famously postulated by Hortense Spillers and further elaborated by Alexandre Weheliye after her, the conceptual operation producing *a* body, producing bodies as distinct entities or 'divided flesh', was itself the very commodifying mechanism which allowed the 'profitable "atomizing" of the captive body' that underpinned slave trade.[56]

Building on these perspectives, we might say that the *notion* of the body (not corporeality as such, or what Spillers calls the flesh) is tasked with three key roles in the construction of the self-possessed individual: it represents the individual's most prominent property;

53 Jan Slaby and Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, 'Introduction: Affect in Relation', in *Affect in Relation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 1-2.

54 Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', 1714. As Harris later explains (p. 1736): 'The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be "not white."'

55 As Nakayama and Martin put this, drawing on Joel Kovel: 'For centuries, Europeans held a firm belief that the best in life was the expansion of self through property and *property began and ended with possession of one's body*'. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, eds., *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 1999), 16; Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 18.

56 Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987), 68. Also see Alexandre G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014).

it consequently demonstrates – if proficiently mastered and itself turned into 'a container for properties'[57] – the individual's more general capacity to own *as such*, which is also to say to impose its will 'on the thing that is perceived to lack will';[58] it encases and cordons off the individual, accurately locating it in space, thereby at once constructing and securing both the private interiority of the self and the externality of everything else. But this is not all there is to the logic of self-possession, as we are about to see.

LIFE AS VALORISATION

Framing life as property, as a propertised relation with oneself through which the individual can or must understand and comport itself as such, begs at least two basic questions. One: what is required in order to assert self-possession, to begin with? But also, two: what to do with this property, or, in keeping with Pateman, 'what follows owning?'[59] Which is also to say: what does self-owning afford, how is this ownership maintained or enforced and, indeed, what does it look like? If even a cursory Marxian analysis can teach us something important here – as I believe it can – and if more adroit Marxist readers will bear with my inevitably oversimplified appraisal – as I hope they will – is that, under what Karl Marx himself described as the 'coercive laws of competition' governing the capitalist regime we are either seduced into and/or made to endure, property *must* be enmeshed in a twofold process of valorisation and accumulation.[60] That this fate might not

57 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 14.

58 Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*, 50

59 Pateman, 'Property in the Person', 21.

60 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990 [1867]), 433. I should point out that here I am not concerned with what Marx (or Marx*ists*) had to say about *individuals*, and specifically how the figure of the individual worker negotiates self-ownership in the selling of its labour power – something that has been comprehensively discussed by the already-cited G. A. Cohen, who shows how Marxian theory is, in fact, often compatible when not even supportive of self-ownership. Rather I am here trying to draw a loose parallel between Marx's general appraisal of the logic

be limited to the spheres of finance and capital proper, or that the logics of financialization and commodification have extended to and infiltrated ostensibly non-economic domains,[61] or in fact that this very compartmentalisation was itself always already troubled by 'the commodity who speaks'[62] (the slave), as we learn from Moten, but also by largely gendered socially reproductive labour, are hardly new or controversial claims to make.[63] Conversely, where this leaves us in terms of individuation and the figure of the individual has been the subject of much and discordant deliberation, particularly in relation to the innovations brought about by neoliberal forms of capitalism. But let us take one step at a time, starting from the issue of valorisation.

In her influential book *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown specifically reflected on the 'sophisticated common sense' that she calls 'neoliberal rationality' to examine the model of subjectivity this produces or encourages: what Foucault famously described as *homo oeconomicus* (economic man), the individual investing on itself as a self-entrepreneur.[64] Brown proposes that an ever-expand-

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of *capital accumulation* and critical analyses of self-possession.

61 For instance, French insurrectionist collective Invisible Committee put this rather plainly when they write that 'Economy as a relationship with the world has long surpassed economy as a sphere'. Invisible Committee, *Now*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2017) 101.

62 Moten, *In the Break*, 8.

63 See: Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995 [1981]).

64 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2015), 34–5; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 226. I should note that, while in earlier work that this book builds on I had no qualms about labelling contemporary forms of individuation as "neoliberal", I have since grown increasingly wary of such a descriptor, particularly after Quinn Slobodian's important analysis of the "Geneva school" of neoliberalism. This is not to say that, like some, I am sceptical about the significance or even the very existence of neoliberalism itself, but that I would rather avoid adopting this term unproblematically, glossing over the far from uniform picture painted by various strands in the literature on neoliberalism as well as by different manifestations of the neoliberal project itself. See Ibled, 'Beyond

ing process of economisation of existence has been exacerbated by an increasingly pervasive 'order of normative reason',[65] implemented through a specific regime of interpellation, according to which '*all* conduct is economic conduct',[66] at the expense of other possible subjectivities. Importantly, she continues, this implies the extension of such an economising spirit well beyond the explicitly monetised dynamics of labour and commerce, as noted above. From work to leisure time, from professional to affective and sexual interactions, from physical to abstract endeavours, 'all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue'[67] – are being redefined primarily as terrains for the enhancement of one's very own set of spendable skills, interests, capacities, and resources. In other words, Brown and many others commentators with her contend that neoliberal interpellations entail a multifarious attempt to colonise and recast every aspect of life as a potential avenue for investment on the peculiar firm that is oneself.[68] Everything can be expected to contribute to the enhancement of one's perceived worth and capacity for further self-investment, which in turn requires the concomitant expansion and generalisation to all spheres of existence of the evaluative, utility- and efficiency-maximising, competitive logic typical of market operations. [69] Ultimately, what we can see emerging from this type of rationality, which Chicago School economists such as Gary Becker neatly

limits', 18–35; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2018).

65 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 30.

66 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 10 (emphasis added).

67 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31.

68 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22. For other notable proponents of this Foucauldian view, see for example Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of The World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013 [2009]); Michel Feher, 'Self-Appreciation; Or, the Aspirations of Human Capital', *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 21–41; Ilana Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (2011): 537–55.

69 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33.

encapsulated in the concept of *human capital*,[70] is an individual reconstructed 'exclusively along entrepreneurial lines'.[71]

This entrepreneurial subject, Brown contends, is a figure that 'is made, not born':[72] made, that is, 'through subtler and reflexive biopolitical techniques of self-formation, self-care, self-fashioning, and self-governance',[73] as Butler and Athanasiou frame it. Indeed, the ever-in-flux portfolio of skills, traits, behaviours, and (particularly) resources required to thrive in today's form of capitalism 'are the result of a combination of innate ability and subsequent development'.[74] Consider, for example, physical prowess and appearance, or intelligence: supposedly "innate" qualities that are nevertheless subject to continuous demands for cultivation, adaptation, and improvement through exercise, cosmetic products, or the acquisition of new knowledge such as languages or professional specialisation. As we will see again later on, the individual is thus not only possessing itself but also encouraged to (re)produce, curate, display, and develop itself so as to increase its value – in order to self-valorise, as it were. But, mind you, these are rarely gentle nudges: being capable of appropriately responding to the shifting demands of a merciless globalised market becomes imperative in order to avert being 'cast off or left to perish',[75] as well as being shamed and deemed unworthy. In this respect, it is perhaps fitting to recall frequent instances when the lives of migrants are defended on the grotesquely cynical grounds that these subjects actually contribute to economic growth – i.e., they are valuable and, more important still, "valorisable".

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70 For a key text on Becker's articulation of human capital theory see Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1964]).

71 Lars Cornelissen, 'The Human Condition in a Neoliberal World', *Critical Studies – Interdisciplinary Journal of the Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2015): 18.

72 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 84.

73 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 29.

74 Cornelissen, 'The Human Condition in a Neoliberal World', 15.

75 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 72.

Examining this notion of the self-entrepreneur is helpful not only for what it illuminates, but also for what it obscures or fails to reckon with. Let me consider the latter here. There are at least three key aspects of the type of assessment presented above – by no means exclusive to Brown, as already noted – that need to be critically probed, even if only schematically, before we can carry on. First, I follow a number of studies that consider it imperative to steer clear of universalising claims painting neoliberalism as productive of a single, homogeneous, and hegemonic figure, usually evoked through the tempting shorthand 'the neoliberal subject'.[76] As Siddhant Issar recently noted, not only 'generalizations about neoliberalism abound', but these are particularly pronounced when it comes to 'the production of individual subjectivities'.[77] To be sure, Brown for one does point to the 'inconstant, morphing, differentiated, unsystematic, contradictory, and impure' nature of neoliberalism.[78] And yet, in her account there appears to be no end of assertions that neoliberalism demands for everyone, everywhere, and all the time to be nothing but an economically-minded, enterprise-like individual. As Brown herself phrases it: 'neoliberal rationality … configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, *always, only, and everywhere* as *homo oeconomicus*'.[79] Now, one might agree with Brown that the various manifestations we call neoliberalism are indeed 'a global phenomenon'.[80] However, if the kind of entrepreneurial subject outlined above is demonstrably not the *only* one inhabiting a neoliberal world, this is not *just* because this project's totalising ambitions 'are rarely fully realized'.[81] Rather, and

76 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33. Also Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of The World*, 255.

77 Siddhant Issar, 'Listening to Black lives matter: racial capitalism and the critique of neoliberalism', *Contemporary Political Theory* 20, no. 1 (2021): 53.

78 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 48.

79 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31 (emphasis added).

80 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 20.

81 Catherine Kingfisher and Jeff Maskovsky, 'Introduction: The Limits of Neoliberalism', *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no.2 (2008): 118.

more importantly, it is also because recasting everyone everywhere as entrepreneurs was never the intention, given that neoliberalism arguably retains the more generic capitalist tendency 'not to homogenize but to differentiate' – primarily through racialisation – as Cedric Robinson has brilliantly shown.[82] In other words: *homo oeconomicus* always requires its abject other(s) *by design*, as part of this constitutive differentiation. A differentiation that is thus predicated upon the setting apart of certain groups and populations as unable or unfit to achieve that same thrifty individuality needed to succeed, hence marked out as 'manipulable and disposable material, fit to be ruled' or abandoned.[83] After all, as Adam Kotsko remarks, Brown herself points out that 'neoliberalism emphasizes not market exchange (which presupposes equality) but market competition (*which necessarily entails inequality, since there must be winners and losers*)'.[84] Nevertheless, this is not to deny that the entrepreneurial individual is indeed a central figure in this story, but rather to clarify, with Kean Birch, that its purported generalisability was only ever meant to legitimise this colour- and gender-blind narrative amongst privileged elites.[85]

A second and, in my opinion, equally important aspect to consider is what or who is said to be lost and supplanted by the generalised rise of *homo oeconomicus*. Brown's work again provides an insightful example. The central preoccupation animating *Undoing the Demos* is the apparent 'vanquishing of *homo politicus*' at the hand of neoliberalism's economising rationality, hollowing individuals' actions of any moral and political content – something that troubles Brown very much, as it fatally undermines

82 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]), 26. Also see Arun Kundnani, 'The racial constitution of neoliberalism', *Race & Class* 63, no.1 (2021): 51–69.

83 Issar, 'Listening to Black lives matter', 54.

84 Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 89 (emphasis added).

85 See Kean Birch, *A Research Agenda for Neoliberalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017), 186.

liberal-democratic life.[86] At a fundamental level, assessments such as this are predicated upon a sharp distinction between the spheres of political and economic life, or what Kotsko calls a 'political-economic binary',[87] that is theoretically dubious at best and, at worst, historically problematic. Indeed, not only the 'tendency to view neoliberalism as the dominance of the economy over all other spheres of life has obscured its distinctive *political* argument for the competitive market',[88] as Jessica Whyte has underscored: more troubling still, this dyad is steeped in a romanticisation of the ancient Greek *polis* which, lest we forget this detail, was constitutionally based on slavery.[89] Relatedly, the *homo politicus* that Brown mourns and is so invested in recovering is, in her words, a 'creature who rules itself and rules as part of the demos'.[90] It is, in other words, a figure firmly and unequivocally rooted within the very same liberal trajectory that gave us the self-possessed individual in the first place and which here simply shows up with another one of its many names: the citizen. And indeed Moten reminds us, while reflecting on the 'figure who substantiates the political', that the citizen is 'coterminous with the subject, coterminous with the self, coterminous with a certain notion of normative personhood', all of which are ultimately 'predicated on [black folks'] exclusion'.[91] By contrast, rather than attempting to establish or return to a better mode of individuation, what this book is gesturing towards is the outright rejection of individuation (i.e., individually-oriented subjectivation) *as such*.

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86 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 41.

87 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 43.

88 Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso, 2019), 16.

89 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 49.

90 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 41.

91 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, '"Wildcat The Totality" – Fred Moten And Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons In A Time Of Pandemic And Rebellion (Part 1)', *Millennials are Killing Capitalism* (podcast), 4th July 2020, min 00:48:49.

The third and last question raised by the self-entrepreneurial individual which I would like to address concerns the extent to which this figure alters or perhaps marks the abandonment of the proprietorial paradigm described by Macpherson. Of course, this is a question that closely maps on to broader debates about the shift from classical liberalism to neoliberalism – something I have neither the capacity nor the intention to engage with in much detail. Still, a passing overview of a few key perspectives – all informed by Foucauldian assessments of Becker's "human capital theory", whereby individuals are conceived as flexible bundles of 'improvable assets'[92] – will hopefully provide important insight on the problem of individuation I am here wrestling with. Anthropologist Ilana Gershon and political philosopher Niklas Angebauer, for example, have both contended that the mode of individuation championed by neoliberal entrepreneurship entails a reconfiguring of the form and content of liberal self-ownership. Gershon argues that most interpellations addressing today's individuals encourage 'owning themselves as though they were a business'[93] more so than as property, with the effect that neoliberal individualism is of a 'corporate'[94] rather than strictly possessive kind. This is an angle also eloquently expressed by Angebauer, who adopts the concept of '*capital* in the person' [95] to revise and update the Lockean property in the person, without however entirely displacing the theme of ownership. On the other hand, sociologist Lisa Adkins has proposed that, in light of rearrangements in deindustrialised economies, the relationship workers develop with their sense of personhood is no longer one of ownership but rather of '*authorship*', thus highlighting the dynamic matrix of contemporary individuation and its audience-oriented spirit.[96] An even more drastic evaluation has been articulated by

92 Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', 542.

93 Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', 539.

94 Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', 543.

95 Niklas Angebauer, 'Property and capital in the person: Lockean and neoliberal self-ownership', *Constellations* 27, no.1 (2020): 55.

96 Lisa Adkins, 'The New Economy, Property and Personhood', *Theory, Culture*

political theorist Michel Feher, who claimed that the mode of generalised competition governing neoliberalism completely transforms the individual from a figure of possession, compatible with entrepreneurship, into one of *speculation*, more aligned with financial capitalism. Indeed, Feher writes, because the subjects of neoliberal rationality are preoccupied with value appreciation – with their self-appreciation – they 'do not exactly own their human capital; they invest in it', thereby supposedly 'escap[ing] the liberal realm of possessive individualism'.[97] Finally, Birch has perceptively observed that while many theorists seem to agree on the centrality of the entrepreneurial model to contemporary individuation, they also tend to gloss over which specific iteration or understanding of "enterprise" they are referring to in their accounts. When invoking the paradigm of the firm or the corporation as models of subjectivity, Birch argues, these critics fail to consider that, at various times in the development of neoliberal political economy, 'the business enterprise and associated managerial philosophy were significantly different from one another'.[98] Birch also questions an emphasis on generalised creative entrepreneurship by foregrounding instead the rise of monopoly-oriented rentier capitalism – which, unlike Feher, he sees as the synergy, not the decoupling, of ownership and speculative investment[99] – and its accumulative tendencies, to which I will return in the next section.

Faced with this wide array of perspectives, my sense is that each of these takes illuminates important and not mutually exclusive facets of a process – that of contemporary individuation – which would be misguided to think of as uniform and stable, as already argued. Not only that: rather than a seismic shift causing a total rupture with liberal individualism, it seems to me that the innovative 'imaginary'[100] accompanying neoliberalism actually *complexi-*

& Society 22, no. 1 (2005): 111–130.

97 Feher, 'Self-Appreciation', 34.

98 Birch, *Research Agenda*, 84.

99 Birch, *Research Agenda*, 145.

100 Ibled, 'Beyond Limits'.

fies the paradigm of self-possession. In this sense, I would concur with Brown when she concedes that entrepreneurial and investment models of human capital 'may cohabit in the same person' because the shift between the two is not as 'thoroughgoing and complete' as Feher makes it out to be.[101] In fact, it is my contention that the self-improvement derived from an investor or speculative attitude is perhaps the very means through which self-ownership gets predominantly expressed and actualised. To put it more plainly: the figure of the individual is frequently established *through* (self-) improvement *as* (self-)ownership. Harney and Moten have drawn attention to the historical connection between property and 'its corollary', improvement: 'from the outset', they write, 'the ability to own – and that ability's first derivative, self-possession – is entwined with the ability to make more productive'.[102] Conversely, Harney and Moten continue, 'to improve is to own, and own more, and thus set in motion further accumulation of self, others, and nature that all might be put to work'.[103] In other words, the individual life is trapped into a neurotic tension between self-improvement and self-affirmation, so that striving towards perfectibility is seen as the prime indicator of the individual's wholeness and self-possession. This is an insight perhaps most strikingly epitomised by learning- and education-based modes of individuation, embodied in that creature of endless self-reformism that is the figure of the student. I will more properly unpack the question of improvement in Chapter 4.

LIFE AS ACCUMULATION

As already noted, possession, *self*-possession, in and of itself is a necessary yet arguably insufficient ingredient in the creation, maintenance, enforcement, and safeguarding of individuation and its product, the individual. Beyond the diverging appraisals that this

101 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 231 n36. Also see Ibled, 'Beyond limits', 33 n12.

102 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 84–5.

103 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 89.

claim has been subjected to, discussed above, such an apparent insufficiency is certainly true when it comes to the terms of capital more broadly for at least two basic reasons. First and most obvious reason: ownership *alone* is 'stasis without movement',[104] whereas capital depends on its circulation and perpetual growth, given the already-cited "coercive laws of competition" compelling each proprietor of the means of production (i.e., each capitalist) 'to keep extending his capital, *so as to preserve it*, and he can only extend it by means of progressive *accumulation*'.[105] In other words, increasing accumulation of capital is not so much (or at least not *just*) a question of blind greed but rather an existential (or "social") necessity for capital to be maintained as such.[106] Second reason, as we have seen before by way of Nichols' work, property must first be *made* and, in Marx, this transformative making has a specific origin and a specific if contested name: so-called primitive accumulation. By this term Marx means a 'process of divorcing the producer from the means of production' that, resulting not simply from increasing commercial profit (as previously posited by classical political economy)[107] but rather from 'conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder', consists of predatory acts of expropriation that are 'written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire'.[108] Now, the principal controversy around this term stems from the fact that, as signalled by the adjective "primitive", Marx appears to describe this forceful sequestration as a transitional phase from feudalism to capitalism, as an occurrence that participates in inaugurating the capitalist social relation but which belongs to capitalism's now-concluded

104 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 88.

105 Marx, *Capital*, 739 (emphasis added). As David Harvey famously put it, capital is not mere wealth but 'value in motion' – see: David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), 90.

106 For a recent and important examination of this structural imperative, see Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).

107 See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A longer view* (London: Verso, 2017 [1999]), 36.

108 Marx, *Capital*, 874–5.

prehistory. However, as many commentators have rightly pointed out, this temporal delimitation is quite demonstrably misguided. For example, geographer David Harvey, drawing on Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of Marx's formulation, contends that

> the specific processes of primitive accumulation that Marx describes – the dispossession of rural and peasant populations; colonial, neocolonial and imperialist politics of exploitation; the use of state powers to reallocate assets to a capitalist class; the enclosure of the commons; the privatization of state lands and assets; an international system of finance and credit; to say nothing of burgeoning national debts and even the shadowy continuation of slavery through the trafficking of people (women in particular) – all these features are still with us and in some instances seem not to have faded into the background but, as in the case of the credit system, the enclosure of the commons and privatization, to have become ever more prominent.[109]

Because of the continuation, diversification, and indeed intensification of this process well into the present, Harvey proposes that a 'primitive accumulation by other means' (including predatory practices that hinge on the takeover and centralisation of existing assets) is actually structurally integral to the *ongoing reproduction* of a planetary capitalist system, and that a more accurate descriptor for such a process would thus be 'accumulation by dispossession',[110] which signals the double-sided nature of this dynamic.

I would like to propose here a few interrelated reflections based on the notions of primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession, as I advance the (not so original) claim that something similar is at play in the production and reproduction of the self-possessed individual. First, note that, if read through the lens of Nichols' formulation, the variegated forms of thievery that Harvey calls dispossession need not be solely describing the simple changing of hands of an existing asset: rather, these can be processes of propertisation, they

109 Harvey, *Companion*, 306–7.

110 Harvey, *Companion*, 309–10.

can be acts of transforming non-property into property (for example, through privatisation of otherwise shared means, ideas, sensations). But if, as previously suggested, being an individual is an hallucination, a phoney impossibility that is prone to manifest itself as such at every turn – always called into question, either by intensifying demands for more individuation, or simply through inevitable glimpses of our general entanglement – it then commands a constant, limitless repetition of this act of taking and asserting possession of oneself. A Sisyphean effort[111] that is ultimately doomed, but not for that reason any less disastrous in the effects of its stubborn recurrence. So, in light of this, perhaps the adjective "primitive" can be intended here not so much in sequential terms, as a temporally defined moment determining a before and an after, but rather in a recursively procedural sense: primitive meaning a necessary and basic precondition, a *conditio sine qua non* without which self-possession could not be sustained. With this in mind, while Paolo Plotegher is right in suggesting that, just as 'private property is also [and perhaps primarily] private property of the self, accumulation is accumulation for the self, enclosure is enclosure of the self',[112] we could perhaps slightly revise this statement by pointing out that possessive individuation presupposes not only accumulation *for*, but also *of* the self. A self-accumulation that, again following Nichols, implies relations of exclusion.

But the exclusion produced by this seizure is one that travels both ways, as it were. On the one hand, of course, 'the one who accumulates does so at the expense of what it takes to be its others – women, slaves, peasants, beasts, the earth itself' – by enclosing, enveloping, extracting, exploiting. And others to this proprietor there *must* be, by design, so the invitation to be a self-accumulating

111 Note that Marx defines in the same terms the hoarding of the limitless money commodity: 'This contradiction between the quantitative limitation and the qualitative lack of limitation of money keeps driving the hoarder back to his Sisyphean task: accumulation'. Marx, *Capital*, 231.

112 Paolo Plotegher, 'What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have? Forms of Non-Oppositional Struggle against Capitalist Subjectivation', PhD thesis (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012) 18.

individual is only ostensibly addressed to everyone.[113] In this sense, in the claiming and making aspects of existence one's own, the parallels to the underlining logic of settler colonialism are perhaps too striking to ignore here. If, together with its most immediately obvious and pernicious connotations – derived from the ongoing brutal history of conquest, subjugation, and theft of land and resources of all kinds – one is to understand settler colonialism *also* (I repeat and underscore: *also*) and more generally as a 'philosophical stance', then we might consider the possibility presented by Moten that, at a deeper level, 'the settler colonial figure *is* the possessive individual'.[114] And, of course, there is no shortage of "colonised others" to this colonising figure. On the other hand, however and like with all property, this exclusionary, self-accumulative regime brings about a deadening 'ossification of sharing', as Harney and Moten describe it, that is in some fundamental ways diminishing for that who accumulates, too: it is a 'loss of sharing' that sequesters the individual and, in so doing, eviscerates it by depriving it of sociality's general wealth – a wealth which is either shared or it is nothing at all.[115] This is perhaps where an otherwise astute observation on the privatisation of life by Henri Lefebvre leads the French theorist astray. Lefebvre argues that a life 'shaped by individualistic tendencies' – or, in keeping with the distinction elaborated above, a life of self-possession – is 'literally a life of "privation", a life "deprived": deprived of reality, of links with the world'.[116] He then promptly qualifies this statement: as a result of this tendency, 'the narrowest, most barren, most solitary aspects of life are taken (and with such crude sincerity) for what is most human'.[117] However, while Lefebvre's assertion is indeed highly perceptive, this is not, I think, because the private individual forgoes 'expanding [and] conquering the world', as he proposes, but precisely due to its drive to

113 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 89.

114 Moten, Blackness and Poetry, 00:39:15 – 00:39:23.

115 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 14

116 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991 [1947]), 149.

117 Lefebvre, *Critique*, 149.

do so, through its impulse to colonise and incorporate. The individual not only possesses, it accumulates; and, somewhat paradoxically, as it accumulates it 'shrinks in upon itself'; and 'the more it shrinks, the more it seems to be "its own"'.[118] Harvey notes that so-called accumulation by dispossession 'can encompass everything',[119] and indeed at a very basic level the self-possessed individual can be said to engage in 'a primitive accumulation of the senses',[120] whereby even the somatic, even the most clear, corporeal evidence of our ongoing general inseparability is mistaken for a private domain: *my* sensations, *my* feelings, *my* intentional acting.

Still, as mentioned earlier, while the accumulative regime upholding the self-possessed individual is in large part something we eagerly perform, perhaps in the ways sketched up to this point, it is equally important to always remember how another type of self-accumulation is often and increasingly also inscribed in processes that are quite explicitly coercive. How and what, then, are individuals bullied into accumulating? We have already seen that property is not a precondition but the result or effect of an exclusionary *process*: in other words, property must be *made*. The same is true, as already suggested, for the peculiar property that is oneself. What is crucial here, however, is not only that, like all property, this individual has to be made, but that it is also systematically *designated as solely responsible for this making*, for *its own* making. The individual is, in other words, the sole agent accountable for this perpetual refashioning, rebranding, but also reproducing of itself necessary to its survival as well as, more importantly, for its failure to do so. As the individual is therefore effectively accumulating more and more responsibilities, so does the notion of responsibility itself undergo privatisation and is 'turned into a reductive set of stifling norms or duties'.[121] What would otherwise be an immediately social dynamic (already given

118 Lefebvre, *Critique*, 149.

119 Harvey, *Companion*, 310.

120 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 57.

121 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 131.

away by the word "response" that the term contains, as Karen Barad notes when talking about response-ability, an 'ability to respond')[122] is reduced to a relentlessly individualised yet thoroughly networked appeal for *responsibilisation*. Athanasiou brilliantly captures this shift when she defines the 'neoliberal corporate privatisation' of responsibility as 'a flight from social responsibility'.[123] Within the paradigm of responsibilisation, she continues,

> there are no social forces, no common purposes, struggles, and responsibilities, only individual risks, private concerns, and self-interests – all individually calculable and imperviously self-mastered.[124]

Now, when responsibilisation fuels a process whereby each subject is individually tasked with 'discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving',[125] the cardinal virtue of this self-possessed figure would seem to be its responsible *independence*. Conversely, following this callous meritocratic logic, the inability or unwillingness to individually cope with this unfathomable, unevenly distributed 'moral burdening'[126] denotes irresponsible dependency.

So, on the one hand, the independence of self-possession is presented as something to aspire to. It comprises 'forms of subjection [that] are felt not as impositions but as *desires*',[127] and it promises a rather enticing reward to those successfully abiding by this regime of interpellation: freedom. Note that this is, again, a very specific, often chimeric, and entirely privatised type of freedom. It is a rallying cry that Cohen suggests is most emphatically yet not exclusively embraced by proponents of what in the US context is described as libertarianism: a freedom understood as the absurd dissolution of

122 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, x.

123 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 105.

124 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 105.

125 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 132-3.

126 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 132.

127 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 55.

all dependencies and 'absence of interference' from wills and actions that are perceived as external to the individual.[128] Montgomery and bergman perfectly outline the pretend play presupposed by such individualist discourses of freedom, when they contend that

> the "free individual" of modern, Western capitalism [...] is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness – his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections – as a feat of excellence.[129]

'This', Brown proposes, 'is the central paradox, perhaps even the central ruse, of neoliberal governance: the neoliberal revolution takes place in the name of freedom'.[130] Whether or not any concrete, positive freedom (freedoms *to*) is effectively granted to the individuals who comply with this regime of interpellation, what matters is for them to become capable of acting *as if* they were or could be free in this way. Which is to say, capable to act *as if* they were and had to be in complete control of themselves, for dependency on others is regarded with contempt or pity, loathed as an impediment and a cost for society. What matters is for individuals to somehow aspirationally internalise *this* type of abstract negative freedom (freedom *from*) as their ultimate horizon and indicator of fulfilment, and to take self-possession as the path to reach and express this freedom, given that 'proprietorship is the generalized form of such exclusive control'[131] over oneself. This is a cunning manoeuvre, Cohen observes, because it can help to brush aside the evident unfreedom of large swathes of the world's population not as a structural issue but as the individually unfulfilled assertion of one's basic and natural self-ownership.[132]

But if this kind of libidinal economy can indeed be central to individual responsibilisation, on the other hand it is of utmost

128 Cohen, *Self-ownership*, 58.

129 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 82.

130 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 108.

131 Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 263.

132 Cohen, *Self-ownership*, 67–8.

importance that we notice again how the independence demanded of individuals can often look more like a sentence than a virtue, and that its corollary freedom can feel more like blackmail than a reward (not unlike Marx's account of processes of proletarianisation "freeing" segments of the population of the means of production and reproduction). The coercive underpinnings of neoliberal responsibilisation are what Maurizio Lazzarato has brilliantly examined in his analysis of the post-2008 debt economy. In *The Making of the Indebted Man*, Lazzarato argues that whereas Foucault saw the responsibilised individual as primarily convinced to take up a self-entrepreneurial guise voluntarily, as a route toward self-fulfilment, it is more frequently the case for this process to be fostered by an overtly authoritarian offloading of the 'costs and risks that business and the State externalize onto society'. [133] As he writes:

> The subjective achievements neoliberalism had promised ("everyone a shareholder, everyone an owner, everyone an entrepreneur") have plunged us into the existential condition of the indebted man, at once responsible and guilty for his particular fate.[134]

In other words, Lazzarato convincingly suggests that, as global capitalism has by and large 'abandoned the epic narratives it constructed around the supposed freedom, innovation, and creativity of the entrepreneur', individual independence as self-reliance or 'more intense dependence ... on the self' is for many clearly taking the shape not of a trophy but of a baton.[135] In this context, stripped of the myth of the unregulated market by the increasingly obvious matrix of 'governance and control' through which the economy actually operates, the mantra of freedom is at most deployed 'as a mechanism to generate blameworthiness', as Kotsko puts it: 'if you

133 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012 [2011]) 93.

134 Lazzarato, *Indebted Man*, 9.

135 Lazzarato, *Indebted Man*, 94–5.

fail, it is your fault, and yours alone'.[136] Confronted with this more or less palpable, more or less monetised, more or less unpayable, but certainly entirely privatised debt, the accumulative logic of responsibilisation thus produces something that we might describe, by way of Saidiya Hartman, as 'burdened individuality':[137] an individual that is increasingly and simultaneously 'self-possessed and indebted'.[138] And indeed, Hartman argues, it is ultimately this very mix of dispossession and self-possession, these 'entanglements of bondage and liberty [that] shaped the liberal imagination of freedom, fuelled the emergence and expansion of capitalism, and spawned proprietorial conceptions of the self'.[139]

Under such circumstances, I think it would be a dead end to oppose the patent deception described above by asserting some kind of *real* individual independence – one that had been promised but was not conceded in the end. This book opts instead for the formulation of a mode of sociality that instead of shunning dependency would celebrate, cultivate, and deepen aspects of it in uncoercive ways. This undertaking will also clearly require a rethinking of freedom: not as solitary conquest and 'point of arrival' but, in Moten's words, as a collective practice of escape to nowhere, a collective 'act of fugitivity'.[140]

Part II: Sociality

I have so far outlined some of the features central to the figure of the individual: chiefly, its self-possessive quality, but also its self-valorising, self-improving, self-accumulating tendencies, whether enthusiastically pursued or coercively imposed, either predicated upon a

136 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 95.

137 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997) 117.

138 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 117.

139 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 115.

140 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 227.

repudiation of constraints under the rubric of personal freedom or manifested as callous abandonment through burgeoning responsibilisation. The question now is: what sort of social life does this creature partake in and indeed presuppose? Conversely, and more urgent still, what would *and* does it mean to think and act otherwise, to tell ourselves a different story and experiment with different modes of sociality? Or, in yet other words, how do we defend ourselves against what Moten aptly describes as 'a fantasy' – that of the individual – 'that shoots real bullets?'[141] Let me take one step at a time, so as to examine what results from 'thinking the entire question of social life by taking the individual as starting point'.[142] In doing so, however, it should also be noted that the various modes of sociality discussed here below are not to be mistaken for incompatible, mutually exclusive alternatives. That is, what follows is not meant to insinuate that we only ever inhabit one type of sociality at a time, which consequently rules out all other ways of being together – just as much as we rarely if ever perform one type of subjectivity at a time. Moreover, I am not aiming to contend that these modes of social life are entirely distinct from one another either, for they often intersect in complex and even contradictory ways.

SOCIETY

Earlier on in this chapter I began to suggest that intending life as a metaphysically private affair – existentially and experientially sequestered, ultimately siloed within the impermeable somatic boundaries of independent entities – is not meant to imply a total absence of social dynamics, even of dependencies. Quite the contrary, the individuals thus interpellated are hardly lone creatures: rather, they are more often than not immersed in and navigating through a vast web of connections, both physical and digitally-mediated, which they

141 Harney and Moten, *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living*, 03:28-03:39.

142 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 32.

establish and are enticed to entertain with fellow individuals.[143] And yet, without getting distracted here by shallow moralising appraisals of the types or quality of the "connections" established, a form of sociality based on connectivity is by definition one always presupposing that we 'participate as individuals, as closed entities',[144] as paradoxically hyper-social hermits. It is from this premise that the "real abstraction" we colloquially call *society*[145] is born: the social order formally arranged between individuals and mediated directly or indirectly by the State, in concert with various other institutional entities. What Barcellona tells us to represent 'the founding act of the modern State'[146] indeed consists in the artificial effort to 'construct an order of coexistence'[147] that could pull together pregiven and distinct entities from a prior condition of relative isolation. An effort emerging out of the perceived necessity of leaving behind that which, according to an infamous passage in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, was the 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'[148] state of nature.

The character of such an antisocial sociality is brilliantly defined by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in his seminal 1996 essay *Being Singular Plural*, as a predicative together-*ness* given by the encounter of autarchic subjects: 'the "together" of juxtaposition *partes extra*

143 See Boltanski and Chiapello's famous discussion on the "connexionist" spirit of capitalism: Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott, New Updated Ed. (London: Verso, 2018 [1999]). The point I am trying to make here goes (or wishes to go) beyond a trite and often quite reactionary condemnation of social media culture in favour of allegedly more authentic relations.

144 Invisible Committee, *Now*, 139.

145 To be distinguished from the more generic term "sociality" I use throughout to instead indicate a concrete practice. For a similar terminological distinction see: Donna Haraway and Nicholas Gane, 'When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7–8 (2006): 143.

146 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 12.

147 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 12.

148 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1651]) 84.

partes',[149] hence conceived as something of an auxiliary substance achieved through, and as an effect of, the joining of otherwise 'isolated and unrelated parts'.[150] The social life of society is therefore imagined by and presented to individuals as 'aggregate life',[151] to borrow from Michelle Murphy's writing on the idea of population. It is a life experienced amongst those same individuals in terms of interpersonal relationships: this is, in other words, the social life of '1+1'.[152] Under these circumstances, then, the 'metaphor of the network'[153] would appear to provide a fitting depiction of the association of discrete, self-sufficient members around which many of today's societies are arranged.

When sociality is thus primarily intended as the regulated interacting of independent proprietors (of their own selves, rights, and capacities), it is not an overstatement to claim that 'the *contract* adequately epitomises the relations of commitment between individuals'.[154] And, of course, when social life is envisaged as a supplementary togetherness that otherwise separate constituents enter into (or find themselves in), a contractualised and contractualising approach to such a being-together functions first and foremost as a contrivance of defence, of protection, of insurance, but also of risk and liability. That is to say, contractual sociality (i.e., civil society) requires a system that would allow to maintain the capacity, preserve the right, or enforce the responsibility for its members (i.e., citizens) to remain in possession of themselves as individuals *even within social dynamics* and, in fact, as a prerequisite for them. That system, that regulatory architecture enabling and mediating the separate togetherness of "free" and "equal" rights-bearing individuals

149 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1996]), 60.

150 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 60.

151 Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017), 6.

152 Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 55

153 Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009 [2007]) 40.

154 Anonymous, 'Call / Appel', 19.

is, as Barcellona and many others have noted, the apparatus of modern Law. It should go without saying that modern Law can only ever function if combined with and enforced through a number of other apparatuses of power – most notably, that of the Police, also known in many anglophone countries as "law enforcement". Still, in his study Barcellona compellingly argues that the establishment of juridical frameworks as the constitutive basis for social life managed to achieve the impossible: '*enabling the unification of an atomised society*'.[155] What is perhaps most remarkable about this almost 'miraculous occurrence', [156] as the Italian jurist describes the workings of modern Law, is its seemingly paradoxical temporality, in that it performs junction and separation at one single stroke. Modern Law, Barcellona writes,

> renders possible the division and atomisation of social life construed as a society of independent individuals and, *at the same time*, enables its unification, achieving that unity which permits to identify society as rule.[157]

This mechanism, this '(anti)social contract',[158] therefore constructs a world that, as philosopher Brian Holmes acutely observes, essentially comes together *through* and *as* its falling apart [159] – an assessment which invites us to take heed not only of the temporal dimension of such an unravelling, but also of its peculiar *causality*. How so? Mitropoulos' meditations on the contract-form might give us some important clues here. In her piercing account, Mitropoulos draws attention to the thoroughly 'performative character of the contractual', by which she means that 'contracts are part of the

155 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 17.

156 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 17.

157 Barcellona, *L'individualismo proprietario*, 17 (emphasis added).

158 Harney and Moten, 'Improvement and Preservation', 87–90.

159 Brian Holmes, 'Continental Drift: Activist Research, From Geopolitics to Geopoetics', in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*, ed. Stevphen Shukaitis, David Graeber, and Erika Biddle (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), 39.

making of what they say'.[160] This can allow us to detect the complex dynamic that this juridical device revolves around, including and especially in the case of the so-called social contract: the latter, then, is a contract that *conjoins the terms that it itself helps to establish*. In other words, the type of separation that civil society enacts must be understood as *recursive* in both logic and structure, in the way described by Nichols, since it essentially 'produces what it presupposes'.[161] Because in civil society each citizen 'must be cognizable as a distinct juridical object', this Hobbesian contractual sociality is literally a mechanism of individuation, it is an individual-making machine.[162] Which can explain why, as Mitropoulos points out, the contract-form underpinning civil society is to be considered as historically 'inseparable from notions of self-possession' – its proliferation assisting the 'inscription of property in an anthropological register' – and has indeed been absolutely 'crucial to the legitimated forms of subjectivity *and relation* that have accompanied the rise and expansion of capitalism'.[163]

COMMUNITY

If the type of association just described grants access to, or secures permanence within, a sum of connected yet ultimately separate individuals, another social form is frequently invoked and passionately upheld as a purported antidote to the misery of social atomisation illustrated up to this point: that of *community*. Whenever and wherever the existential alterity – the networked and responsibilised isolation – fostered by liberal democracies and further intensified by neoliberal policies spurs disillusionment, showing its inherent viciousness and failure to deliver at scale what it ostensibly promises (other than to a *very* selected few), but also whenever and wherever

160 Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion*, 20.

161 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 9.

162 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 31.

163 Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion*, 32.

that ambiguous phantasmagoria we call globalisation is misunderstood as global homogenisation, communitarian discourses regularly take up the challenge of either recovering or constructing a social cohesion that is perceived as lost or outright lacking. Community is thus seen, in the words of Roberto Esposito, as 'an origin to be mourned or a destiny foreshadowed'.[164] It is however important to remain suspicious of hasty generalisations regarding communitarian pleas, and to avoid subscribing to an 'oversimplified opposition of two types of sociality: the series [...] and the fusion', as Maurice Blanchot warned us in his classic essay *The Unavowable Community*.[165] An emblematic and oft-cited case of such a dichotomisation can be found in an 1887 study by influential German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who articulated a sharp opposition between the separateness that is core to society and a community predicated upon unity. [166] The sheer vastness and diversity of literature devoted to the meaning of community – cutting across the political spectrum, and only some of which is addressed here[167] – is testament to the complexity that characterises this concept. A complexity, then, that would be foolish to flatten as if the term "community" were descriptive of a single imaginary and mode of sociality, as if all communitarian rhetoric and practice were equivalent in content and intent. Nevertheless, we will see below that it is perhaps this very versatility that represents at once one of the concept's main problems and its seductiveness.

164 Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010 [1998]) 2.

165 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988 [1983]), 7.

166 Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft*, trans. Charles P Loomis (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002 [1887]).

167 A few seminal examples discussed in this book are Esposito, *Communitas*; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Christopher Fynsk (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015 [1991]); Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013 [1990]).

Of course, many communitarian views do traffic in an understanding of social life as fusion, often in the explicit effort to oppose crudely individualistic paradigms: that is, a sociality whereby many become one, the plural becomes singular, the individual is absorbed within the harmony and homogeneity of a self-enclosed whole. In this case, the togetherness of community results in what Nancy describes as 'gathering *totum intra totum,* a unified totality'.[168] This mode of unity is rather variegated in and of itself. Needless to say, it can be found most emphatically at the root of fascisms of all stripes, propelled by identity-based supremacism, retreating into the suffocating and arbitrary comfort of sameness, and informing the construction of 'imagined communities' – as historian Benedict Anderson described them[169] – around patriotic and nationalistic allegiances. But it can just as much show up in the slippery cohesion of new-ageist precepts, where it is often dangerous groupthink and subservience to spiritual authority to act as a binder. However, the unifying homogenisation that recourses to community can produce is not exclusively an effect proactively sought by certain groups. Crucially, it is often also weaponised in the discriminatory attempt to make entire ethnic, racial, religious, class, and cultural groups accountable for this or that offence, crime, inadequacy, or transgression committed by some of their members. Gargi Bhattacharyya and colleagues have described this tendency with great clarity, for example when they note that 'It is now a common part of Britain's racist repertoire to demand "the Muslim community" denounce acts of "terror", or for "the black community" to distance itself from "gang crime"'.[170] Moreover, community can be mobilised to gloss over significant material inequalities and differing interests across certain groups, helping to justify or indeed to encourage the

168 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 60.

169 See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2016 [1983]).

170 Gargi Bhattacharyya, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Sita Balani, Kerem Nişancıoğlu, Kojo Koram, Dalia Gebrial, Nadine El-Enany, and Luke de Noronha, *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 89.

accumulation of (relative) wealth, power, and authority by elites within those groups under the pretence that such accrued affluence and influence will then magically trickle down to and benefit the other members, as if by osmosis.[171]

On top of all this, we should also be alert to the fact that, concomitantly, the very same communitarian vocabulary has been deployed to drape geopolitical and economic exclusion with virtues of openness and internationalism. A case in point is the European Union, known until the 1993 Maastricht Treaty as the European Economic Community, sometimes dubbed "Fortress Europe" in condemnation of the Union's anti-immigration politics that have turned the Mediterranean into the planet's 'deadliest border' so as to safeguard its members.[172] Further complicating an already contradictory picture, the rhetoric of community is repeatedly dragged back into the fold of overtly individualist frameworks through rabidly liberal multiculturalism. Armed with conveniently hazy endorsements of communitarian values, it is not hard to see that the latter is a social life predicated upon reified otherness and approached as a question of *intersubjectivity*: a view that, if we take our cue from Massumi, clearly brings us back to square one by 'start[ing] from a world in which there are already subjects that are preconstituted'.[173] Moreover, ostensibly communitarian sentiments and ambitions were also baked from the start into the sclerotic countercultural mix out of which emerged the mecca of entrepreneurial individualism that is the Silicon Valley.[174] And indeed, as the Invisible Committee

171 Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022).

172 Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (London: Verso, 2016), 16–23; Harsha Walia, *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 105–6. Also see: Henk van Houtum and Roos Pijpers, 'The European Union as a Gated Community: The Two-Faced Border and Immigration Regime of the EU', *Antipode* 39, no. 2 (2007): 291–309.

173 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 52.

174 See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth network, and the rise of digital utopianism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

remark, 'after having ravaged all the existing bonds, capitalism is running on nothing but the promise of "community"'[175] – one, of course, 'of proprietors wilfully associated'[176] and coming together for the co-creation of value. Which is all to say, finally, that the contested notion of community appears to be simultaneously pulled in rather divergent directions.

Many of these ambiguities are on full display, even if not always wittingly, in the work of anthropologists Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, which I think is worth of a brief assessment here. In two debate-style dialogues published ten years apart, Amit and Rapport have jointly yet discordantly interrogated the meaning, virtues, and reach of the theme of community.[177] Taken at face value, and despite the collegial tone characterising both books, the positions of the two authors seem quite distant. On the one hand, Rapport's scepticism towards communitarian discourse is motivated by an understandable wariness of the 'ubiquitously positive' connotations this notion tends to carry,[178] but also and primarily by his unambiguous cheerleading of cosmopolitan individuality (effectively an aspiringly globalised version of the networked society discussed earlier on). What Rapport advocates is a 'polity based on a morality of individual sovereignty' and the upholding of a universal existential singularity that the community-form is, in his view, heedless of if not a threat to.[179] On the other hand, Amit's perspective is perhaps more complex: while acknowledging a problematic 'proliferation of unspecified invocations of community', she insists that this 'ambiguity' should lead us to recognise the protean nature of the term 'as a useful

175 Invisible Committee, *Now*, 133.

176 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 32.

177 Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). It should be noted that neither of the authors' position appears to have significantly shifted from the first to the second book.

178 Amit and Rapport, *Community*, 210.

179 Amit and Rapport, *Trouble*, 139.

analytical resource', instead of dismissing it altogether.[180] The form of communitarian "sociation" that Amit identifies as most desirable, and which she foregrounds most emphatically in the second book, is that of 'consociation': a term she defines through reference to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as an 'association in fellowship or alliance'.[181] However, while Amit's defence of community is an endeavour that she embarks on in earnest, where this takes her does, to my mind, ultimately converge with Rapport's appraisal on an important point. Indeed, we can see in both cases an acceptance, whether unreserved or more cautious, of the individual's metaphysical primacy and structural priority over social life. So, if Rapport claims with great confidence that 'social life may be understood as the *effects* that individuals have upon one another', Amit declares her optimism for building 'forms of everyday consociation to afford people some sense of ownership over the terms of their social connections'.[182] In other words, each from a different angle, both authors squarely subscribe to 'the assumption that we could ever be anything but already shared and already sharing',[183] that social life is a result of connections between individuals rather than a general and primary condition, as I will elaborate on shortly.

The example of Amit and Rapport can be instructive in detecting a key issue at the centre of communitarian discourses, whether predicated on rigid essentialisms or on voluntary associationism. Even when faced with the heterogeneity discussed above, self-evident as it might seem, one thing that appears to permeate all recourses to community is the idea of a "common". From fascistic and supremacist tendencies, through dodgy spirituality, to liberal cosmopolitanism and corporate mantras of value co-creation, the sociality of community hinges on some*thing* – on some thing – that

180 Amit and Rapport, *Community*, 3–4.

181 Amit and Rapport, *Community*, 24.

182 Amit and Rapport, *Community*, 207, 204.

183 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'Plantocracy or Communism', in *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living: Tentative and Urgent*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Wietske Maas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 52.

must be possessed by all its members: a common property, whether physical or abstract, whether already owned, to be seized, or forcibly assigned. Few have articulated this link between community and property with the same lucidity as Esposito. What unites otherwise divergent takes on community, he argues, is

> the ignored assumption that community is a "property" belonging to subjects that join them together: an attribute, a definition, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality, or as a "substance" that is produced by their union. In each case community is conceived of as a quality that is added to their nature as subjects, making them *also* subjects of community. [...] In each case, community is what is most properly our "own".[184]

We can see in this passage how the notion of community, whatever ambitions and beliefs it might express, still remains anchored to the very same logic of possession that this book is instead working to undermine. Which is to say that the paradigm of property, although apparently distributed in this case, is still part and parcel of communitarian modes of sociality and, with it, the 'enforceable claim to exclude' that Nichols tells us to be the hallmark of property.[185] Indeed, Esposito continues, what is "common" in community 'is defined exactly through its most obvious antonym': that is, the members of any given community, he affirms, 'are the *owners* of what is common to them all'. [186] What follows is that each member of a community is not undone as such, but simply reconfigured as something of a *shareholder*. And if this sounds familiar, that is because we have already encountered the same terminology in Lazzarato's earlier assessment of neoliberal governmentality. Which is also why there *can* actually be formal differences but no substantial contradiction between the possessive individualism of liberal civil society and many approaches to community. Whether this shared property is produced, gradually

184 Esposito, *Communitas*, 2.

185 Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 31.

186 Esposito, *Communitas*, 2 (emphasis added).

incorporated, or recognised from the start in each individual's 'national character or, more problematic still, genetic predisposition',[187] the sociality of community is thus trapped in a conundrum. As it is framed in an anonymous pamphlet linked to the authors of French journal *Tiqqun:* 'the question of what I belong to [...] has been reduced to the police fiction of legal property, of what belongs to me, of what is *mine*'.[188] A baffling reversal of terms.

Still, as already suggested earlier, some communitarian approaches do exist that attempt to resolve the aporias described above. At least two are deserving of a passing mention here. The first one is presented by Esposito's own work. Esposito locates in the derivation of the Latin word *communitas* a generative springboard through which one might attempt to radicalise the meaning of community. This etymological excavation leads Esposito to argue that the *munus* from which community (*cum-munus*) is derived 'isn't a property or a possession [...] but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given'.[189] Community as indebtedness. The second attempt to salvage the notion of community is instead represented by those many thinkers and practitioners who underscore its verb-like nature:[190] that is to say, those privileging acts and practices of common*ing* over the conceptual stillness of the common. Community as process. However, while this move can serve to avoid the serious pitfalls of essentialist claims often colouring communitarian discourse, this articulation

187 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 222.

188 Anonymous, 'Call / Appel', 64.

189 Esposito, *Communitas*, 6.

190 E.g. see: Anette Baldauf, Stefan Gruber, Moira Hille, Annette Krauss, Vladimir Miller, Mara Verlič, Hong-Kai Wang and Julia Wieger, eds., *Spaces of Commoning: Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016); Gustavo Esteva, 'Commoning in the New Society', *Community Development Journal* 49, no. suppl_1 (1 January 2014): i144–59; Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Guido Ruivenkamp and Andy Hilton, eds., *Perspectives on Commoning: Autonomist Principles and Practices* (London: Zed Books, 2017). I would like to thank Elona Hoover for her advice on questions of commons and commoning.

seems to still run up against some of the same conceptual hurdles already mentioned. Because commoners *come together* with the intention to make, re-make, or reclaim something common, not only a shared "good" of some kind must still be on the horizon, but also this risks continuing to pursue the image of previously disjointed subjects that participate in a collective production of sorts. I will confront the designerly angle on this participatory productivism in Chapter 2. To be sure, as we will see throughout the book, Esposito's *conceptual* shift from a logic of addition and ownership to one of subtraction and indebtedness – a mode of owing rather than owning – is in many ways remarkably close to the type of sociality that I am here seeking to formulate. Likewise, I recognise considerable *pragmatic* affinity with, as well as influence from, those interventions that preserve an interest in the common by turning it into an ongoing practice of sharing.[191] And yet, twenty years after the publication of Esposito's study and ten after Amit and Rapport's latest effort, the transformative potency foreshadowed by the notion of community appears at best to have been entirely cannibalised by capitalist recuperation due to its general ambiguity and, at worst, to be again increasingly mobilised in evermore reactionary ways. Which is why, rather than attempting to recover this concept I will try instead to deploy a different vocabulary, following a tentatively divergent route 'beyond claims of similitude and community'.[192] That is, I will seek to look beyond both alterity and identity, to disconnect from endorsements of interacting singularities and communitarian forms of belonging, and particularly to leave behind property-oriented frameworks, in order to instead foreground and explore facets of that difference without separability which Ferreira da Silva calls for.

191 Just to give an example, on top of the communing literature already cited, I am thinking here for instance about Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan's account of their work at the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. See: Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

192 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 187.

FRIENDSHIP

Up to this point I have attempted to examine how a social life based on a sum of independent units constructs and relies on a paradoxical condition of connected separation: a 'relational individuality'.[193] I then proposed that the increasingly glaring deficiencies of rampant individuation are often being met with calls for *community:* a sociality to be either established or retrieved. Yet, these responses seem fundamentally unable to escape an oppressive and/or exclusionary logic of unity – sometimes only nominally different from the 'the unity of unities'[194] characterising civil society – and, moreover, this unity is in every case still structurally bound up with the logic of property – by way of the specific common that all members of a community *must* possess or preserve or recover or institute, albeit often through distributed ownership. With these observations in mind, my aim now is to consider what might animate a sociality (re) imagined and practised as a form of general indebtedness disconnected from proprietorial paradigms, as a generative entanglement before and beyond any strategically interacting agents.

For a start, in keeping with Nancy's analysis that has accompanied us throughout, rethinking and rehearsing sociality outside of the sphere of possession arguably requires for "being-together" not to be perceived as 'a "social" or "communitarian dimension" *added* onto a primitive individual given'.[195] The French philosopher indeed sets out to dispute a rationality that posits

> first the individual, then the group; first the one, then the others; first the rights-bearing subject; then real relationships; [...] and above all, first a "subject," then "intersubjectivity." [196]

That is to say, in his study Nancy wants to reformulate and, in fact, turn on its head the entire question of sociality as it is routinely

193 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 283.

194 Esposito, *Communitas*, 2.

195 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 44.

196 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 44.

approached, extending Martin Heidegger's sketched reflections on *Being-with* [*Mitsein*] so as to radically prioritise *with* over Being to the point of making it the very foundation of, and constitutive precondition for, life itself.[197] This metaphysical or perhaps procedural prioritisation of the *with* – of social life over individual lives – is expressed in entirely unambiguous terms already in the first few pages of Nancy's text, where he contends that 'Existence *is with:* otherwise nothing exists'.[198] Possibly an uncontroversial statement, according to Nancy if this *with* is to be made primary it must however cease being intended as a predicate, as a 'particular and supplementary qualification' of a somewhat pre-existing "I".[199] That is to say: it must instead be interpreted as a general and structural condition. Although at first sight this formulation might seem to relapse into the (comm)unity of fusion that obliterates difference, this is not at all what Nancy is getting at. Rather, he claims, this originary *with* is to be understood as the opening *out of which singularity must emerge* for any meaning to become at all possible. In other words, the general and generative *with* of sociality appears not as a homogenising unification but precisely as its opposite: it is a *with* in and as the *spacing* of Being, a primal and immanent "between" that 'no longer appears as a com-position, but only as a dis-position'.[200] Crucially, the dis-position Nancy describes is not an act of separation either but, rather, a process of 'dispersion' or a general 'distancing': it is a 'stretching out' of Being.[201] Consequently, Nancy concludes that this *with*, which is *neither secondary to nor derived from individuals*, casts life as 'singularly plural and plurally singular'.[202]

197 For Heidegger's assessment of *Mitsein*, see §I.4 of Being and Time: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 37th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2015 [1927]), 149–68. Nancy follows Heidegger in his differentiation between "being" – a singular entity, as it manifests itself (i.e., *a* being) – and the more general notion of "Being" – which we could define here, with some rather crude approximation, as "Life" itself.

198 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4.

199 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 60.

200 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 46.

201 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12, 16, 5.

202 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 28.

Now, as we walk this thin conceptual line, always in danger of precipitating into either unity or fragmentation, what are we to make, operationally speaking, of such rich yet admittedly convoluted articulation? Where the narrative of the self-possessed individual – the 'immanent totality'[203] – from which this chapter started is 'a war cry directed against everything that exists *between* beings, against everything that circulates indistinctly',[204] the counternarrative offered by Nancy and gradually taking shape here points us instead towards a mode of sociality that might have no other texture, origin, or destination than that very between – an immanent between. But wait! At the risk of being overzealous, there is something here that might need to be further clarified or, perhaps, to be more accurately confused.

Nancy alerts us to a potential misunderstanding, suggesting that the between he is speaking of 'constitutes no connective tissue',[205] and indeed an insistence on liminality may still imply or even conjure interacting yet distinct elements. In other words, a sociality of the between may still tempt us to cling onto the image of a discrete "you" and a discrete "I", albeit only retrospectively identified, arranged in oppositional fashion and finding some kind of common middle ground.[206] Liminality could still carry the trace of some kind of separability, when not even gesture towards it. A separability that Ferreira da Silva's locution, adopted from the start as this book's beacon, reminds us not to conflate with *difference*, as if the latter presupposed alterity: a differentiation that not only needs not be sacrificed, but which we must preserve and cultivate, to which we shall commit. After all, as Moten points out, 'differences' are inevitably what 'we *share*, not differences that come between us'.[207] Which is another way

203 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

204 Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 32.

205 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

206 For a similar reflection on the oppositionality of "between", see Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3–4.

207 Moten et al., 'Refusing Completion', 8.

of saying that differentiation is necessarily predicated upon a lack of discreteness, of distinctness – a lack of separation. Perhaps, then, more so than as a between, we might better understand the kind of "singular plurality and plural singularity" Nancy is describing in terms of an *amongst*:[208] It is an intraplay, an involvement, a mingling. We might better interpret it as an intransitive gathering, imbued with absolute intransigence when it comes to our differential inseparability. Perhaps a social life outside both individuation and communal unity (i.e., individuation by other means) is precisely this gathering without object, this *being* gathered in relation without relationality. Perhaps, following Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, it is *Relation* as poetic totality, whereby 'we no longer need to add: relation between what and what?'[209] The question we shall confront, then, is the following: how to attend to a sociality of this kind, one that both entails a differentiating spacing and is manifested as incommensurable proximity?

Throughout much of their book *Joyful Militancy*, Montgomery and bergman are seemingly concerned with similar issues. The two authors argue that intense forms of closeness, intimacy, and affinity can constitute a significant threat to the smooth functioning of the aggregative science of separation we call capitalism – or to what they refer to, after Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, via the shorthand "Empire".[210] Everywhere this 'dangerous closeness' shows up, Montgomery and bergman go on to suggest, Empire attempts to quell, crush, or regulate its blurring effects out of existence by way of 'relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units'.[211] And it is with Montgomery and bergman, alongside many others, that I wish to align here in tentatively

208 See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 86.

209 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 27.

210 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

211 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 82.

addressing this mode of sociality by a rather unassuming yet philosophically loaded name: *friendship*.[212] Why so? If, as previously proposed, contemporary social fragmentation is frequently hinging on a thoroughly privatised interpretation of freedom, the notion and practice of friendship offers a way to reconsider this skewed concept. Indeed, while commonplace definitions of freedom tend to revolve around '*rights*, *absences*, and *lack of restrictions* ... applied to an isolated individual', Montgomery and bergman remind us that, actually, 'freedom and friendship used to mean the same thing': a shared capacity for attachment and 'the commitment to face the world together'. [213] The Invisible Committee, who Montgomery and bergman also cite, indeed observe that

> "Friend" and "free" in English, and "Freund" and "frei" in German come from the same Indo-European root [...] Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I am free *because I have ties*, because I am linked to a reality greater than me.[214]

When cast under such a decidedly different light, rather than indicating the phantasmal promise of 'being unhindered, unaffected, independent' that props up the self-contained, self-determining, strategic individual, freedom is returned to a thoroughly social dimension.[215] Freedom as friendship is thus indicative of a collective capacity for sustaining a mode of social life that is 'not about

212 Beyond the authors considered here, some influential texts discussing friendship are Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, Further revised ed. (London: Penguin, 2004); Michel Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life' (1981), in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotexte(e), 1996), 308–12; Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005 [1994]). A more recent text worth mentioning is Todd May, 'Friendship as Resistance', in *The Anarchist Turn*, ed. Jacob Blumenfeld, Chiara Bottici, and Simon Critchley (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 59–79. The homogeneity of this list is not lost on me.

213 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 83.

214 Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015 [2014]) 127.

215 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 84.

controlling things but about learning to participate in their flow'.[216] When interpreted as a process and a practice of entanglement and entangling, as a practice of getting or staying evermore intensely and collectively coimplicated – of being opened and held and collected instead of enclosing and clasping and collecting[217] – we begin to see how friendship may be 'revalued as a radical, transformative form of kinship'.[218]

Anything but an uncontested term, Montgomery and bergman are rightly alert to the tame and bland version of friendship that capitalism proffers: one that seeks to reduce moments of intimate coimplication and differential "amongstness" to 'a banal affair of private preferences'. [219] Moreover, it would be disingenuous to ignore that, even when not numbed as a mollifying incitement to just "get along", friendship can also get deployed as the vehicle for instrumentally extractive logics.[220] That is to say, as Montgomery and bergman warn us, friendship can quickly become weaponised as a 'source of coercion, manipulation, and exploitation'.[221] I will leave it to the reader to decide whether these co-optations are sufficiently compromising to abandon the grammar of friendship altogether, just like I decided to leave behind the notion of community earlier on, or indeed if this is precisely what they mean when they invoke community/commoning. However, my sense is that, if anything, these usurpations should in fact be taken to signal that 'friendship is a terrain of struggle'[222] and, I think, a terrain worth fighting for, no matter how minor or trivial this might appear. Indeed, in contrast to insipid or extractive relationality,

216 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 92.

217 See Stefano Harney, 'What Collects in a Collective?', in *Spaces of Commoning: Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday*, ed. Anette Baldauf, Stefan Gruber, Moira Hille, Annette Krauss, Vladimir Miller, Mara Verlič, Hong-Kai Wang, Julia Wieger, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 10–12.

218 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 93.

219 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 93.

220 As famously discussed by Aristotle. See: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

221 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 124.

222 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 93.

friendship is also and primarily the name of tentative, humble, mundane practices of cultivating complicities as 'the very means of undoing Empire',[223] as an integral 'part of the insurrection'[224] against everyday individuation. It is to this particular acceptation of the term that I shall refer here and throughout.

Unlike the social abstractions implied by concepts such as society and community, I want to contend that friendship – at least the mode of friendship I am foregrounding here – cannot be divorced from a concrete and eventful plane of practice. In other words, friendship is not something that we *are* or *have* (the predicative category "friend", or perhaps a virtue, in the Aristotelian sense)[225] but rather something that we *do* together. It is a collective practice, unfolding on the spot along ever-morphing lines of lived complicity, intimacy, and solidarity that form, unform, inform, and deform us. As it is intended here, and unlike the *productive* coming together at stake in processes of commoning, friendship can be interpreted as a peculiar form of social life that does not depend on pre-existing and strategically minded subjects. Which is to say that friendship is something (or someplace?) we find ourselves in most certainly before we can *intend* it. Perhaps Blanchot said it best when he described a general form of friendship as 'camaraderie without preliminaries ... vehiculated by the requirement of being there, *not as a person or subject, but as the demonstrators of a movement*' – a movement that, he then specifies, is 'anonymous and impersonal'.[226] Understood in this way, friendship is the recognition, preservation, and intensification of an entanglement that, to some extent, befell us: not in the passive sense that it merely "happens" to us but, conversely, that we happen *to* and, more accurately perhaps, *as a result of it*. In friendship, Agamben would say, we 'do not share

223 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 25.

224 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 131.

225 See: Giorgio Agamben, 'The Friend', in *'What Is an Apparatus?': And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009 [2007]), 31; Scott, 'Preface', vii.

226 Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 32 (emphasis added).

some*thing* (birth, law, place, taste): [*we*] are shared by the experience of friendship'.[227]

A sociality of friendship therefore appears as a peculiar field of generative sharing and shared generativity through which we cultivate and celebrate a mode of being 'already "outside ourselves", beyond ourselves, given over, bound to others'.[228] However, as already noted earlier via Nancy, to claim that friendship is "generative" is not necessarily to say that it is *pre*-individual – a conformation which would suggest that something still recognisable as an individual would eventually result from it. To the contrary, friendship 'disturbs and disrupts' the very sense or logic of discrete coherence and wholeness that the figure of the individual is predicated upon; it messes up 'not only the possibility of but the desire for individuation', for independence, which is to say the desire for disentanglement.[229] Friendship is therefore akin to an anti-ontological sabotage: it is the jamming or, as Harney and Moten put it, the malfunctioning of the 'individuation machine'.[230] It is in this sense that Agamben arrives at the conclusion that friendship is not reducible to the mere encounter with another "I" – with an Other – but is instead an event of utter 'desubjectification'[231] that destabilises and, ultimately, undermines individual and individuating boundaries. This blurring of personal perimeters can be witnessed every time someone is 'no longer sure which ideas and mannerisms were "their own" and which belonged to the friend',[232] perhaps because they are both and neither at once. Now, make no mistake: if the peculiar sharing of friendship, unlike that of the commons, is 'a sharing without an object',[233] a sharing

227 Agamben, 'The Friend', 36.

228 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 106.

229 Moten et al., 'Refusing Completion', 10.

230 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 133.

231 Agamben, 'The Friend', 35.

232 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 90.

233 Agamben, 'The Friend', 36.

without content other than itself, it is also true that this often *does* unfold through and in the midst of acts of commoning. And yet, because this unfolding goes on beneath and regardless of any plot, of any objectives, of any formalised or teleological articulation, my sense is that friendship is a practice of, in, and for what Harney and Moten have been describing as the *under*-commons. It is a conspiracy *in* the commons but *against* the very logic of ownership that animates and regulates the commons.[234]

What, then, fuels this mode of sociality, this friendship beyond self-possessive individuation and propertied unity? A tentative answer might now come: an insurgent practice of complicity, powered not by empathy, by alliances, or even by care for one another but, rather, by care for the continuous disruption and by commitment to the ruthless destitution of the very logic of the one and the other. This is a self-dispossessive 'care for the *event*' of friendship, to use Manning and Massumi's words: a care which therefore 'assumes no commonality or ethos of consensus'.[235] If approached in this way, the particular complicity at stake in friendship leaves room for, provides a refuge for, and indeed attends to our precarious, precious, undercommon singular-plurality, without being based on the 'calculated equality'[236] of a contractualistic logic *and* without 'implying that we are all in the same situation, [thereby] erasing difference and antagonisms'.[237] This is the social life of undercommon friendship: a social life where we live as not one, always 'incomplete in the service of a shared incompletion'.[238] In friendship, individual completion – or a crasis of the two terms, "individua/tion", showing us that these are in fact one and the same – is a betrayal of always

234 Harney and Moten, 'Plantocracy or Communism', 52.

235 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 108 (emphasis added).

236 Anonymous, 'All The Terrible Things We Do to Each Other', in *Vortext*, by CrimethInc., 2012, 60.

237 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 41.

238 Harney and Moten, 'Plantocracy or Communism', 52.

ongoing undercommuning and undercommoting: our dangerously and joyfully inseparable syncopation, spoiling the flow of one and one, of every one and everyone. No room for oneness in friendship: not for *the* individual and not for *the* group, not for *the* citizen and not for *the* commoner. Not even for *the* friend, *the* author, *the* academic, *the* artist, *the* activist, and certainly not for *the* student and *the* user. In friendship, then, 'we live where you *and* I can't live, which is the truth of all that beauty, which we protect and convey, as lovers'.[239] In friendship we study, we use, we study use.

239 Fred Moten, *all that beauty* (Seattle, WA: Letter Machine Editions, 2019), 3 (emphasis added).

2

Infrastructuring

> *It's not simple to think about a power that consists in infrastructures, in the means to make them function, to control them and to build them. How do we contest an order that isn't articulated in language, that is constructed step by step and wordlessly? An order that is embodied in the very objects of everyday life. An order whose political constitution is its material constitution. An order that is revealed less in the President's words than in the silence of optimal performance.*
>
> *Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 2015 [2014]: 86*

What I have tried to argue (perhaps overscrupulously) throughout the last chapter may be schematically summarised as follows: friendship can be a social practice that obliterates individuation's possessive logic and, conversely, individuation is a process of separation that lays siege to the sharedness of social life that the practice of friendship can express and preserve. In articulating this perspective, one of the central claims I have sought to foreground regarded the primacy of sociality over the figure of the individual. To say that social life comes first, therefore, is also to say that the individual is both derivative and reductive of sociality's general richness, which individuation strives to sequester, regulate, and accumulate through various forms of propertisation – in keeping with Nichols' term – whether in monetary or kinaesthetic terms. What it is *not* to say, on the contrary, is that this primary and ongoing sharedness of friendship is a given that does not need constant rehearsing, that does not need reviving, protecting, celebrating, cultivating in as many ways and under as many circumstances as possible.

In the Introduction and then again in Chapter 1, I stated the intention for this book not to be solely concerned (or even satisfied) with formulating an abstract take on social life: rather, the ambition here is explicitly that of working towards, as well as of reflecting back on, something of a pragmatic experimental intervention, regardless

of how minor such an intervention might appear to be. Indeed, this book is driven by the desire to cause a small ripple that could hopefully join many others in obstinately contesting the logistics of bodies – the progressive 'degradation of means',[1] as Harney puts it – through which capitalism assaults and strives to capture and thwart our collective capacity to feel and stay shared. Which is to say: our capacity for articulating and practising manners of being together, for engaging in kinetic polyrhythms and haptic entanglements that do not presuppose our participation as individuals. In other words, this book is ultimately committed to devising a mode of studying (as) sociality, a collective practice of sensing together that can be experimented with in corporeal ways through moments of use. This material practice aims to at least temporarily short-circuit the experiential boundaries established and rendered desirable by individuating regimes of motion and perception. It seeks to oppose capitalist impositions of 'rhythms ... at once absorptive and isolating',[2] grounded as they are in 'the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self'.[3] It endeavours to operate what Jacques Rancière might describe as a 'redistribution of the sensible',[4] as a way of studying our sharedness, of tending and attending to our entanglement, by way of experimental practices of use.

Now, if the scene of use is often a prime terrain of individuation, as already suggested earlier on, this is at least in part due to the material conditions of possibility that mediate this domain of practice, as well as to the ideological schemas that the construction of such a mediation both enacts and reproduces. In other words, we might say that the individuation of use is arguably a *design* problem rooted in a specific (humanist) view of technology and technological mediation. Another way we can understand this dynamic is through the IAE (Ideas Arrangements Effects) conceptual framework, developed

1 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 15.

2 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 25.

3 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 115.

4 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [2000]) 42.

by the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), which posits that 'Ideas are embedded within social arrangements, which in turn produce effects'.[5] Accordingly, a certain *idea* of (and attachment to) the human – particularly when defined in its supposed contrast to technology and as a subject of agency, intentionality, and mastery – is embedded in all sorts of socio-material *arrangements* such as devices and environments, which in turn produce individuation as their *effect*. The DS4SI importantly note that the apparent linearity of IAE should not be overstated and taken to describe a causal string of events, so this is neither a purely materialist nor a purely idealist view. In fact, it is also the case, for example and certainly when it comes to individuation, that 'Arrangements yield new ideas that perpetuate Effects', but also that 'Effects can yield new arrangements, or even other effects, and so on'.[6] IAE thus proposes a recursive dynamic between the ideal and the material that is reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's famous discussion of *habitus* – a concept I will not address in this book.[7]

What is especially helpful about the IAE framework is not only the analytical clarity it offers, but also how it can guide interventions that seek to use design as their medium. Indeed, the DS4SI invite us not to focus exclusively on existing effects but, rather, to also consider how rearranging material conditions and embedding in them alternative ideas can produce different ones. Granted, redesigning arrangements can sound normative, prescriptive, even authoritarian, and indeed these are tendencies that can often be harboured by design practitioners and scholars alike, whether critically or uncritically. That is to say: the moment design's ethical, political, or, for that matter, ontological dimensions are foregrounded, it can be tempting to infer that to design is necessarily to *structure* action, to structure use, and to structure those engaging in it. This might in turn

5 Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), *Ideas Arrangements Effects: Systems Design and Social Justice* (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2020), 18.

6 DS4SI, *Ideas Arrangements Effects*, 52–6.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1972]).

suggest that designing is at heart a form of material policymaking, intended in the broadest sense of the term, and therefore, ultimately, a form of managing and of policing. All of this can certainly be the case, so much so that many design theorists and practitioners have championed the critical importance of design's structuring and restructuring character (or, sometimes more grandiosely, the *power of design*) in various ways and with various objectives – at times with problematic undertones and at other times more promisingly.[8] However, as I am hoping to show in due course, designing new arrangements can (and often does) also lead to openings that are not prescriptive and that do not hinge on normative categories such as politics and ontology, both of which are so intimately bound up with individuation, as mentioned earlier on. Designing can be, as I would like to frame it, an *infrastructuring* rather than structuring force. Bearing in mind the IAE framework, this chapter will elucidate the type and form of experimentation that this book wishes to present by considering the many ways design practices arrange and rearrange everyday life.

DESIGN

Ahmed, much like psychologist James J. Gibson in his influential discussion of affordances,[9] points out that 'use is a restriction of

8 I am thinking here of a broad church of design-related thinkers: in particular, philosophers of design such as Tony Fry, Anne-Marie Willis, and others connected with the now-defunct *Design Philosophy Papers* journal, but also Arturo Escobar's recent attention to the "political ontology" of design, as well as Social Design theorists like Lucy Kimbell and Ezio Manzini. However, because I am only tangentially interested in design as a field, as already explained in the Introduction, I will deliberately refrain from engaging in distracting disciplinary diatribes, so as to avoid defining my work primarily in opposition to other articulations (articulations that I often respect even when feeling increasingly distant from them).

9 In a nutshell, Gibson suggested that an 'object offers what it does because of what it is': that is, its use is directed by its pre-existing material conformation and attributes (or affordances). James Jerome Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2015 [1979]),

possibility that is material', in the sense that the 'qualities of a thing' might allow us to do certain things and not others, to mingle in certain ways and not in others.[10] Similarly, it could be said that what the present work set out to explore is how designing and rearranging certain material restrictions of possibility can produce new effects, can be enabling of new processes and practices of sociality, of new ways of studying that depart from the pernicious, fictional idea of individuality. And yet, something is missing here: it seems to me that use is never just the encounter with *a* thing, nor are qualities and restrictions of possibility properly *of* a thing, but rather emerging out of situated and often complex interplays. To be sure, this is something that does not elude Ahmed either. But if a cherrypicked quote must not suggest otherwise, it can nonetheless offer an opportunity to stress that, more often than not, 'designing is entangling'.[11] This is perhaps what architect Keller Easterling calls 'medium design': a kind of material practice that 'works with protocols of interplay',[12] intervening in a given context by rewiring or recomposing the ecology of how things are organised so as to introduce new yet indeterminate – 'deliberate, but unfolding'[13] – capacities of, and parameters for, interaction. It is important to emphasise, as Easterling goes on to argue, that 'the intent of designing interplay is not to fix positions but to initiate interactivity'.[14] Or, in our case, to renew – which is to say to study – our ongoing *intra*-activity.

Here below, I want to follow some of these threads and articulate a few reflections on how design practice might facilitate the

130. Interestingly, from our usological perspective, Julka Almquist and Julia Lupton contend that Gibson's 'affordance precedes subjectivity, interpretation, *use*, and meaning'. Julka Almquist and Julia Lupton, 'Affording Meaning: Design-Oriented Research from the Humanities and Social Sciences', *Design Issues* 26, no. 1 (2010): 7 (emphasis added).

10 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 26.

11 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso, 2021), 13.

12 Easterling, *Medium Design*, 10.

13 Easterling, *Medium Design*, 40.

14 Easterling, *Medium Design*, 11.

studious use that is the focus of this book. I will first address the turbulent connection existing between design and use in general terms; I will then take a closer look at a few significant examples of practice that have inspired my approach, whether directly or reactively; and finally I will examine a number of ways in which design's involvement in questions of sociality broadly understood has been conceptualised, situating my work partially in relation to these frameworks. Ahead of these reflections, however, let me briefly formulate a couple of crucial caveats regarding this book's interest in design, which I believe to be important in order to avoid misconceiving what the purpose and limits of this discussion are.

First of all, it is perhaps necessary to remind the reader that, as anticipated in the Introduction, design is of interest here only obliquely and insofar as it speaks to the field and social practice of use. The fact that, once again, it is use and not design that takes centre stage throughout is not meant to downplay design as a field of practice. Rather, it is simply to signal the present exploration's general disengagement – as much as possible – from the ever-expanding set of critical reflections, discourses, and theorisations interrogating the nature of design as a distinct discipline and specific culture. Not only keeping track of design's 'cacophony of voices',[15] its various strands of disciplinary introspection, and its boundaries self-policing is like herding cats. Equally, and this cannot be emphasised enough, *this book has no interest whatsoever in participating in a reorientation or even expansion of what we understand design to be (for)*, so it will not systematically concern itself with the many debates gesturing in that direction. Consequently, wherever this exploration is juxtaposed with existing frameworks, that is not to indicate a more fruitful path that I believe design ought to take. I think this is also a quite important point to keep in mind when it comes to the examples of practice presented below. I assess a selected set of projects, some of which by designers that have become canonised, not to claim that these are in some way representative of the state

15 Craig Martin, *Deviant Design: The ad hoc, the illicit, the controversial* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 31.

of design practice and research as a whole, but because they are each evocative of specific designerly attitudes, because they display certain traits and adopt certain tactics in their design, so they can hopefully provide a helpful backdrop to ground my reflections and better explain what I am trying to do or not to do. Secondly and relatedly, because this is a story first and foremost about the social practice of use, and only secondarily about designing, I will not devote in-depth consideration to the socialites of *design* practice. In other words, I will only cursorily address some questions of participation from a design perspective, as these pertain to notions of infrastructuring, without however confronting in a systematic manner the many discourses, practices, and intellectual traditions that are formally described as Participatory Design and Co-design – which are primarily preoccupied with how we *design* (more so than use) collaboratively, with how sociality is practised in and through processes of designing.[16] The same goes for this book's interest in the convergence of use and study, rather than of design and study, which means that I will not directly examine here the complexities of design pedagogy and epistemologies as such, but instead only suggest manners in which design could be 'lending itself to study'.[17]

DESIGN AND USE

The sphere of design and the field of use are entwined in a complicated relationship. On the one hand, use has been a key concern for many design practitioners and clearly a recurrent theme for design theorists and philosophers. Yet, on the other hand, upon closer inspection perhaps Toke Riis Ebbesen is not wrong either when contending that 'the concept of use in design is, if not overseen,

16 Nor, for that matter, will I closely examine the 'immanent collaboration' that defines design practice when understood through a posthumanist lens. Martin, *Deviant Design*, 29.

17 Maria Hynes, 'FCJ-224 Design Thinking, Design Activism, Design Study', *The Fibreculture Journal* 30 (December 2019, Incalculable Experience): 27.

then at least underprioritized'.[18] How are we to understand this apparent paradox, this simultaneous centrality and marginality of use in design? My sense is that, despite design's significant operational proximity and privileged conceptual access to questions of use, attention to the latter has often been subsumed under, or remained primarily a proxy for, the investigation of other frequently overlapping design issues. In other words, although the importance of use to design *has* indeed been registered – whether superficially assumed or more carefully probed, not least through the dubious claims of design's exceptionality already mentioned in the Introduction – to the point of appearing self-evident, I would argue that scant direct attention has been devoted to use as a practice entirely in its own right. Which is also to say: use in design has rarely been thought *from the perspective of use itself*.

As is always the case, some exceptions do of course exist. Apart from Ebbsen's call for 'a closer examination and revival of the concept of use'[19] in design research, two rare and important deviations from this subordination of use to neighbouring preoccupations that I would like to highlight here, both of which will then be woven into the reconfiguration of use presented in Chapter 3, are Theodora Vardouli's classification of designerly attitudes towards use and, even more prominently, the independent and collaborative work of Ramia Mazé. Vardouli identifies three distinct 'attitudes' through which design research and related fields of inquiry articulate 'the relationship between the design, function, and use of artifacts', namely 'design-centric, communicative, and use-centric', each corresponding 'to a different set of theoretical commitments about

18 Toke Riis Ebbesen, 'Use in Design Culture', in *Design Culture: Objects and Approaches*, ed. Guy Julier, Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Niels Peter Skou, Hans-Christian Jensen, and Anders V. Munch (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 53. I should note that Cameron Tonkinwise has also commented on this lack, albeit taking a decidedly Marxian perspective, arguing that 'a critical account of use value, remains underdeveloped" in the field of Design Studies. bringing us back to the brief discussion in the Introduction on Ahmed's and Manning's pairings of use and value. Tonkinwise, 'Design Studies', 16.

19 Ebbesen, 'Use in Design Culture', in *Design Culture*', 55.

the prime actors, contexts, or operations by which [human-artifact] engagements are to be conceptualized'.[20] The third attitude, use-centric, is especially relevant to the trajectory pursued by this book, for it describes a view of use 'as an open-ended and temporally unfolding process that can be theorized and described independently from intentions and actions in the context of design'.[21] As for Mazé: particularly in her *Occupying Time*, to my mind still the most robust and compelling investigation on the topic of use from a design perspective over fifteen years on, she emphasizes how design should perhaps be conceptualized as 'an intervention into ongoing cultures of use', thus upholding the relative theoretical autonomy and critical significance of the latter.[22] In other words, Mazé argues: 'design matters, but so does use', therefore design practice and research both have much to gain from reigniting a certain probing curiosity around the nature of use itself, not regarded as epiphenomenal.[23] With these allied formulations in mind, let me now consider a few ways in which a direct engagement with use gets frequently subordinated to neighboring design preoccupations.

When looking at how use features in the work of designers and design scholars, something that I think leaps to the eye is that things and/or persons, objects and/or subjects (as well as their binary opposition) more so than actions are often brought to the fore: use tells us something about the nature and role of artefacts; use is what users do or are expected to do, and how they express who they are; use is how designers communicate with and to users via their designs. More specifically still, against this general backdrop several broad tendencies can be identified each taking use as ancillary to the exploration of another issue or set of issues. Once again without advancing claims of exhaustiveness, but also while

20 Theodora Vardouli, 'Making Use: Attitudes to Human-Artifact Engagements', *Design Studies*, Special Issue: Computational Making, 41, Part A (2015): 139.

21 Vardouli, 'Making Use', 140.

22 See: Ramia Mazé, *Occupying Time: Design, Technology, and the Form of Interaction* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2007), 128.

23 Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 128.

keeping in mind that a great degree of crossover exists between these areas of empirical and conceptual inquiry, let me review here what seem to me to be some of the most prominent ones.

First, an interest in use in design research and practice is often subsumed under, when not utterly eclipsed by, questions of *functionality*, with the former being essentially treated as an in-act expression or execution of the latter, or perhaps a search for it. This strand of inquiry arguably colours most if not all others examined below, and it is the one I will devote most pointed attention to in the next chapter. Whether directly or indirectly, a function-centred view indeed represents the dominant approach to use to the point of appearing nothing more than common sense. It is widespread and colloquially accepted to such an extent that use and functionality are often conceptually and pragmatically indistinguishable notions, adopted interchangeably in both scholarly and everyday parlance, or, at most, two complementary sides of the same coin.[24] When use is observed through this functionalist prism, it is primarily associated with a quest for instrumental utility, with usefulness in practical terms. To be sure, countless critical efforts have sought to challenge a narrow obsession with efficiency by *enlarging* our understanding of functionality, so as to bring into its fold also the remits of the symbolic, the emotive, the poetic, the intellectual, the expressive – as outlined for instance throughout Andrew Blauvelt's 2003 edited volume *Strangely Familiar,*[25] but also as attested by the examples of practice and literature presented further below. However, it is worth pointing out that because the objective of this type of work is not so much questioning functionality *as such*, generative as it might be it still seems to me to fall short of appreciating use entirely outside of, or at least unclouded by, a functionalist horizon. This is important if we are to appreciate the extent to which functionality's grip on use

24 Such is the view presented by Victor Margolin in a widely referenced study on the figure of the user. See Victor Margolin, 'Getting to know the user', *Design Studies* 18, n.3 (1997): 227-36.

25 Andrew Blauvelt (ed.), *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003).

is in equal measure extremely firm and not at all uniform, how it is wide-ranging but also expressed in a variety of ways. Whatever the case, this perspective entails seeing use as the attempted fulfilment of a purpose, as purposeful action in response to a perceived need or desire (of whichever nature this might be) – and it is therefore tightly bound up with questions of intentionality, as already discussed. In this sense, a striking indicator of this synergy between use and function is the common labelling of a supposedly incorrect use, of a use that does not conform or correspond to what was intended "by design", as a misuse – on which more in just a moment. Now, we might argue that, particularly in commercial design contexts, a focus on the functional aspect of use often translates into a quite crude and ultimately abstracted engrossment with the aesthetic qualities of artefacts, as if functions were something designed into and residing inside the form of products, interfaces, spaces, etc. Yet, plenty of more sophisticated views on the connection between use and function have been articulated, including those directly building on Gibson's concept of affordances mentioned above.[26] Among these, a rather nuanced perspective has emerged through design studies that treat use as a site of communication and function as the message that is being relayed. In this case, artefacts are seen to be the mediating vehicle within a process of interpretation and negotiation of meaning established between designer and user. This approach understands use as something akin to the decoding of a text – "written" by the designer and "read" by the user, whether in the way it was intended or not – and which can thus be assessed through methods and theories borrowed from semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism, linguistics, and literary criticism.[27] I

26 One notable example being the user-centred design (UCD) work of psychologist Donald Norman, who is often credited for having popularised this concept in design research. E.g., see: Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002 [1988]).

27 See: Madeleine Akrich, 'The De-Scription of Technical Objects', in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1992), 205–24; Richard Buchanan, 'Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration

will return to how this view relates to questions of authorship in due course.

Second, and as I further unpack in the next chapter, the question of use in design has also been conceived as a question of *users:* which is to say, as essentially a question of subjectivity, identity, and cultural manifestations. These subjects of use are defined by their (allegedly temporary) role, that of users, which is conferred on them through engagement with the realm of the artificial. When conceptualised in these terms, acts of use are of interest to designers and design scholars in so far as they are the expressions of, and/or can provide insight into, people's intentions, habits, needs, desires, creativity, and interpretation of the material world they encounter. Of course, such an insight can be extracted at different stages of a design process, and it can be valued for a variety of reasons. Mazé notes that users' actions can be subject to analysis 'prior to design development (as in ethnographic studies, market surveys, or focus groups), in cycles of iterative design (as in "contextual", "collaborative", or "co-" design), or afterwards (as in usability testing)'.[28] Often drawing on the communicative framework presented above, use can therefore feature as something of a dialogic device to gauge users' motivations, tastes, and reactions to specific material affordances and stimuli. This can create information that might then feed back into a further stage of designing, generally with the ultimate goal of maximising the efficiency of what is being designed and creating an increasingly greater 'fit between people and designed things'.[29] The latter modus operandi is central to what has come

in Design Practice', *Design Issues* 2, no. 1 (1985): 4–22; Nathan Crilly et al., 'Design as Communication: Exploring the Validity and Utility of Relating Intention to Interpretation', *Design Studies* 29, no. 5 (2008): 425–57; Klaus Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2006); Bruce M. Tharp and Stephanie M. Tharp, *Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Vardouli, 'Making Use'.

28 Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 138-9.

29 Johan Redström, 'Towards User Design? On the Shift from Object to User as the Subject of Design', *Design Studies* 27, no. 2 (1 March 2006): 128.

to be known as User-Centred Design (UCD, as well as its cognate method Human-Centred Design, HCD): a type of design process, particularly widespread in the industrial sector, that 'aims at anticipating eventual use' by observing or directly consulting the hazy figure of the "end-user".[30] Designer Jane Fulton Suri, a partner and executive at UCD-pioneering global consultancy IDEO, articulates this dynamic quite unambiguously. 'Observation', she contends, 'can sharpen our awareness of how people respond to particular arrangements and elements', which in turn 'helps us make better predictions about how people will perceive and interpret things we design so we can better elicit the kind of response we want'.[31] It is not hard to see, particularly in the latter part of this quote, how the risk is that it is really the user itself who is being designed in UCD, as Johan Redström warns us, for the rather normative aim of this kind of exercise tends to be making sure that the user will behave according to a designer's directives.[32]

Yet, if the tendency described here can quickly descend into forms of commercially-minded social engineering,[33] a focus on the user is also central to other use-driven interventions and modes of inquiry that are explicitly critical of mechanistic accounts of action, and which instead emphasise the critical or emancipatory potential of users' participation. For example, researchers drawing on disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) have been interested in the role that designing opportunities for participatory use can have in shedding light on dynamics within given groups and constituencies, giving voice to otherwise silenced or marginalised communities, but also to catalyse the coalescing of new "publics" around emergent or ill-defined socio-technical concerns. In this case, user-participants

30 Johan Redström, 'RE:Definitions of Use', *Design Studies* 29, no. 4 (1 July 2008): 414.

31 Jane Fulton Suri + IDEO, *thoughtless acts?* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2005), 171.

32 Redström, 'Towards User Design?', 128.

33 Almquist and Lupton, 'Affording Meaning', 9.

are invited into collective processes that might be less directly oriented towards problem-solving than they are attempting to "democratise" design practice itself by facilitating the formulation of complex and socio-politically pressing questions.[34] This mode of design practice and research, itself multifarious in methods and scope, often informed by a sense of social responsibility and at times driven by activist ambitions, generally falls under or is linked to the extremely capacious umbrella category of Social Design.[35]

This takes us to a third broad designerly focus: the expression of peoples' creativity and inventiveness through use. Questions around both functionality and users' agency already addressed above can be seen to converge here, again alerting us to the overlaps between various forms of engagement with the field of use from a design perspective. In this case, the key concern is essentially the role that users do or do not play as the active subjects and producers of material and consumer cultures, subcultures, and countercultures. From this angle, attention to use might pass through the examination of

34 E.g., see: Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, 'Participatory Design and "Democratizing Innovation"', in *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference* (ACM, 2010), 41–50; Christopher A. Le Dantec, *Designing Publics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); John McCarthy and Peter Wright, *Taking [A]part: The Politics and Aesthetics of Participation in Experience-Centered Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015) 95-96, 109-115; Alex Wilkie, 'User Assemblages in Design: An Ethnographic Study', PhD Thesis (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2010); Matt Ward and Alex Wilkie, 'Made in Criticalland: Designing Matters of Concern', in *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society (UK), University College Falmouth, 3-6 September*, ed. Jonathan Glynne, Fiona Hackney, and Viv Minton (Boca Raton, FL: Universal-Publishers, 2009), 118–23. Also of interest is the collaborative AHRC project *ProtoPublics*; see Lucy Kimbell and Leah Armstrong, 'ProtoPublics Developing participation in social design: prototyping projects, programmes and policies' (2015).

35 Jan Boelen and Michael Kaethler, *Social Matter, Social Design: For good or bad, all design is social* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020); Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Victor J. Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Academy Chicago, 1985 [1984]); Elizabeth Resnick (ed.), *The Social Design Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

design's involvement in old and new patterns of commodity acquisition, display, and disposal in response to the affective logics of capitalism.[36] Something that might immediately come to mind, in an age of rampant data-driven surplus extraction, is the burgeoning reliance of business ventures of all sizes and kinds – from Big Tech corporations to clothing brands – on so-called user-generated content, whereby the boundaries between production and consumption are blurred, often through gamification and the birth of the self-exploiting figure that futurist Alvin Toffler infamously baptised as the 'prosumer'.[37] However, userly creativity is equally observed through the kind of everyday tactical appropriations described by de Certeau and briefly addressed in this book's Introduction. Just to look at two examples also cited by Redström, consider for instance how DJing emerged from an unconventional use of turntables, originally meant for music listening rather than mixing; or the way skateboarding exploits existing urban elements, such as safety handrails, using them as obstacles to perform risky tricks on or over.[38] At an even more mundane level, the same imaginative spirit is arguably recognisable in ubiquitous and prosaic quotidian acts, such as using steps as a bench, a lighter as a bottle-opener, or a shoe to prop open a door. The already mentioned Fulton Suri, who has collected many examples of this kind of behaviour, calls this mode of operating 'thoughtless acts', arguing that people regularly adapt, co-opt, exploit, reinterpret, and react to things, intuitively and sometimes subconsciously, 'mak[ing] use of opportunities present in [their] immediate surroundings'.[39] As I will show in more depth later, this recognition has in turn sparked fascinating discussions about, and experimentation with, the design of deliberately unfinished, adaptable, and ambiguous artefacts, often to foster opportunities for

36 Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2014 [2000]).

37 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1980).

38 Redström, 'RE:Definitions of Use', 419. Also see Ocean Howell, 'The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, urban design, and the new public space', *Urban Action* 30 (2001): 64–86.

39 Fulton Suri + IDEO, *thoughtless acts*, 61.

open-ended and playful practices of use.[40] Yet, Sara Ahmed sees this same inclination at work also in unassuming pursuits that might appear to have nothing whatsoever to do with design proper. Such is the case, for example, in the use of a well-trodden country path which, Ahmed points out, 'exists because people have used it' and is therefore quite literally designed *through* its use.[41]

And it is here that we get to a fourth, highly complex, and tightly connected strand, representing something of a variation on the same theme of user creativity: the way use is increasingly interpreted *as itself a mode of designing*. Building on the correct observation that professional designers' intentions not always or, in fact, rarely correspond to how things are actually used in everyday life, it has indeed been suggested that use can be reimagined as not necessarily the end point but, rather, the continuation of the design process at the hand of the user. That is to say, the argument goes: because people tend to appropriate what they use in unpredictable and sometimes highly inventive ways, either deliberately or unintentionally subverting the protocols of action that designers embedded in their designs, thereby bringing to light altogether novel material configurations in the process, use can be conceived as a type of design practice in its own right. This designerly creativity of use takes many forms. Indeed, it has been accounted for in more ways than I can cover here. Each of these draws our attention to specific aspects or qualities displayed by and through the improper, unsanctioned, everyday

40 E.g., see: William Gaver, Jacob Beaver, and Steve Benford, 'Ambiguity As a Resource for Design', in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI '03 (New York, NY: ACM, 2003), 233-240; John Chris Jones, 'Continuous Design and Redesign', *Design Studies* 4, no. 1 (1983): 53-60; Jamer Hunt, 'Just Re-Do It: Tactical Formlessness and Everyday Consumption', in *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003), 56-71; Guy Julier, 'Value, Relationality and Unfinished Objects: Guy Julier Interview with Scott Lash and Celia Lury', *Design and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009): 93–103; Damon Taylor, *Moving Objects: A Cultural History of Emotive Design* (London, Bloomsbury, 2020); Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Is Design Finished?: Dematerialisation and Changing Things', *Design Philosophy Papers* 3, no. 2 (2005): 99-117.

41 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 40.

manipulation of products, environments, and interfaces by users, in ways that not only reveal their untapped potential but can also be generative of palpably new material arrangements. Subversion and reconfiguration in use of hegemonic cultural elements has notably been central to tactics coming to design in drips and drabs via the artistic avant-gardes, chiefly that of *détournement*, loosely translatable as "hijacking". A core tool within the repertoire of French revolutionary group Situationist International (SI), to which I will return later in this chapter, this technique entailed 'the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble' fuelled by sheer contempt for imposed codes of signification.[42] A not too dissimilar ethos is also a cornerstone of hacker culture, whether in its once-outlaw guise, in its unholy alliance with Silicon Valley's cult of disruptive innovation, or as the darling prey of corporate design parasitism.[43] Hackers' expert usership enables the opening up and alteration of purportedly polished technologies so as to bring about novelty – or, as McKenzie Wark puts it, to 'release the virtual into the actual'.[44]

Moreover, creative use can be prompted by the necessity to meet an immediate need through the repurposing of what is at hand. Two

42 Situationist International, 'Détorunement as Negation and Prelude' (1959), in *Situationist International Anthology (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 67. Although relatively well-known in architectural, urbanistic, and graphic design milieus, as far as I can see *détournement* is of surprisingly limited explicit influence on the design debates discussed here. Most design-based references to this tactic seem to be in relation to the design research method known as *cultural probe*, which I discuss further below. See Lucian Leahu, Jenn Thom-Santelli, Claudia Pederson, Phoebe Sengers, 'Taming the Situationist Beast', in *Proceedings of the 7th ACM Conference on Designing Interactive Systems*, (ACM, 2008), 203–11. It also worth mentioning here the kindred countercultural form of so-called *culture jamming*: a markedly communication-oriented descendant of *détournement* that Naomi Klein describes as 'the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages'. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York, NY: Picador, 2010 [1999]), 280.

43 See the case of IKEA's vampiric co-optation of customers' inventiveness: Martin, *Deviant Design*, 100.

44 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) §074.

sub-trajectories can be identified here, largely depending on the degree of intentionality ostensibly guiding the designing. On the one hand, Uta Brandes, Sonja Stich, and Miriam Wender have foregrounded mundane forms of unconscious improvisation in their acute analysis of the 'everyday metamorphosis of things'.[45] Interestingly, they argue that spontaneous instances of reinterpretation in use like the ones described by Fulton Suri should not be solely of interest insofar as they spark further professional intervention. Instead, these represent a distinct social practice which Brandes and colleagues call *Non-Intentional Design* (or NID). Neither a mere misunderstanding of the 'proper function' of an object nor a conscious DIY effort to create a new product (cf. upcycling), NID describes the purposeful, temporary, and somewhat designerly abuse of existing artefacts through their transferral into contexts of use beyond those for which they were originally intended.[46] On the other hand, perhaps the most influential expression in design of userly resourcefulness is a practice that Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver have famously dubbed 'adhocism'.[47] In their 1972 book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, Jencks and Silver celebrated this attitude of makeshift ingenuity, which involves the arbitrary alteration and recombination of directly accessible elements, rather than raw materials, in response to the urgency of an emerging and context-specific situation. While adhocism unlike NID is a combinatory act deliberately and explicitly geared to the crafting of new tools or systems – thus perhaps not quite as improvisational as Jencks and Silver claim[48] – it does not amount to meticulous planning at a remove from a given issue, only by amateurs instead of experts. Rather, Jencks and Silver write, it means 'using an available system in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently', in

45 Uta Brandes, Sonja Stich, and Miriam Wender, *Design by Use: The Everyday Metamorphosis of Things* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009).

46 Brandes et al., *Design by Use*, 9.

47 Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, Expanded ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013 [1972]).

48 Brandes et al., *Design by Use*, 15.

the here and now.[49] Not so much a properly formalised method, the userly inventiveness at work in adhocism consists in a de-professionalised attitude similar to that of the bricoleur: a form of direct-action-through-making, so to speak. It is a 'sensibility', as design geographer Craig Martin puts it, hinging on and expressed through intentional 'misuse' and compounding of existing resources in such a way that leads to innovative designs.[50] Martin has recently taken up and further elaborated on the ideas of Jencks and Silver. He argues that the role of the user and that of the designer come to merge through adhocism's 'ingenuity of approach' and proto-designerly intelligence, resulting in something of a hybrid figure: that of the '*informal* designer'.[51] Now, it should be pointed out that, once again, this fourth tendency seems to embrace an inherently strategic, goal-oriented acceptation of use (regardless of how consciously so), but also that, across all of its iterations, this remains a discussion primarily concerned with design and functionality, albeit accessed here from the perspective of use.

Fifth and last strand. Use has been identified as a field of action that, because inevitably embedded within given material conditions and imbued with ideological connotations, designers can mobilise as a rhetorical device to interrogate dominant culture as well as to imagine future societal configurations and practices. This current is often central to a rather diverse mode of practice-based research, commonly referred to as *Critical and Speculative Design* (CSD), that although highly scrutinised over the past decade or two still evades straightforward definitions, and which tends to inhabit the uncomfortable space between academia and the world of galleries and museums.

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49 Jencks and Silver, *Adhocism*, 9.

50 Martin, *Deviant Design*, 90. If only in passing, I want to highlight here how the very notion of misuse already implies a 'perspective of expertise', as Stephen Wright lucidly underscores, given that, 'from the perspective of users, everywhere, so-called misuse is simply…use.' Wright, *Usership*, 26.

51 Martin, *Deviant Design*, 76–7. Crucially, Martin shows the potential 'deviancy' of adhocism, which he sees as staging forms of more or less overt contestation of dominant norms, thus disturbing design's self-image of apolitical moral uprightness and illuminating instead the ethical messiness of this field of practice. Martin, *Deviant Design*, 76.

I shall not spend too much time assessing CSD here, simply because this will be the object of closer examination further below. However, for the purpose of this section it will suffice to point out that CSD work is frequently developed through the design of one-off pieces, prototypes, or props serving as the focal point for cultural commentary and/or the staging of speculative and fictional scenarios. Importantly, such prototypes and props are not actually meant to be used in physical terms but only 'in the imagination',[52] perhaps with the help of accompanying textual material and video-recordings of highly curated performances of interaction. In his systematic appraisal of CSD practice, design theorist Matt Malpass has described this tactic through the very fitting term 'rhetorical use', a concept which is meant to denote 'a type of imagined and fictional use'.[53] Malpass goes on to clarify that,

> Through rhetorical use, critical design practice leverages practical functionality to achieve the primary goal of delivering a deliberate message that is potent enough to spark contemplation, discussion, and debate by allowing users to imagine using the object in their everyday life.[54]

Ostensibly, then, the aim of this current of design practice is that of generating public debate about the ethical and political dilemmas arising with the emergence of new technologies. Within this context, use or, more precisely, the '*aesthetics* of use'[55] is understood as an exemplary instantiation or dramatized depiction of such dilemmas. However, as has been repeatedly noted,[56] what transpires most prominently from

52 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001) 64.

53 Matt Malpass, 'Criticism and Function in Critical Design Practice', *Design Issues* 31, no.2 (2015): 70.

54 Malpass, 'Criticism and Function', 70.

55 Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008 [1999]), 43 (emphasis added).

56 E.g., see Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 147–8, 154–5; Cameron Tonkinwise, 'How We Intend to Future: Review of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming', *Design Philosophy Papers* 12, no. 2 (2014): 169–87.

this work seems to be less actual debate than the *authorial ambitions* of designers, intent on crafting and delivering their social commentary, often in the form of cautionary tales about looming dystopian futures. As we will see below, CSD's scenarios of use indeed function primarily as an act of enunciation: they are the often witty, grotesque, admonitory, or absurdist punchline carrying the voice of design-auteurs throughout the unfolding of their object-based storytelling.

DESIGN AND STUDYING USE: CRITIQUE, SPECULATION, FICTION

Having examined several conceptual frameworks through which designers and design researchers engage with and make sense of the field of use, even if obliquely for the most part, I want to take a closer look at two broad currents of practice that have informed the pragmatic experimentation with use covered in this book. First, I will here formulate some reflections on critical and speculative approaches to design practice that I believe can be interpreted as modes of studying use – in keeping with Meyerhoff's terminology encountered earlier on, for one way or another they can all be said to devote sustained attention to the field of use – although ultimately not of *studious use* as I intend it here. Second, in the next section I will then consider designerly approaches to studying the sociality of use through the wide-angle lens of Participatory Design (PD), interrogating in particular the political intent that this type of practice is often fuelled by. I have already noted that the case studies presented here are only meant to be a suggestive sample. This is to say that they are not to be regarded as a comprehensive cross-section of CSD and PD, and certainly not of design practice as a whole (hence the potential generalisations in what follows), nor is this selection supposed to imply that studying use must be a professional pursuit, that it is something only "expert" designers have access to – as should already be clear from my previous discussion of the everyday, informal creativity of use. However, the fact that certain projects might be deliberately and self-consciously

experimenting with practices of use and practices of sociality can hopefully allow for a more pointed analysis. Just finally, my main focus here will be on practices to some extent engaged in the making of three-dimensional artefacts and, for the most part, drawing on an admittedly quite narrow pool of examples from the so-called Global North. While this limitation is solely attributable to my lack of direct familiarity with other design contexts, I hope that the points raised here can somehow also apply beyond these boundaries.

What I find particularly interesting about various strands of CSD and adjacent currents is the employment of design as an experimental and exploratory medium that can look beyond the discipline's historically commercial commitments to efficiency maximisation or cosmetic restyling. Of course, the work that we might today tentatively consider as part of something like a CSD tradition did not emerge out of thin air. Indeed, in its effort to broaden design's agenda and scope of action, CSD followed in the footsteps of a motley lineage of practices aiming to break with aesthetic and cultural canons while purportedly operating either at the fringes or altogether outside of mainstream consumer markets. This genealogy interweaves in complicated ways with the development of an equally heterogenous array of socially and politically "engaged" design perspectives (to be partly addressed in the next section), but also with the activity of and critical discourse around the artistic avant-gardes, as well as with global political-economic shifts. Due to these complexities, but also since this genealogy has already been very effectively examined by several commentators, there is arguably no point in retracing its twists and turns here in much detail.[57] Suffice

57 Apart from what already cited, see for example: Simon Bowen, 'A Critical Artefact Methodology: Using Provocative Conceptual Designs to Foster Human-Centred Innovation', PhD Thesis (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009); Tobie Kerridge, 'Designing Debate: The Entanglement of Speculative Design and Upstream Engagement', PhD Thesis (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2015); Matt Malpass, *Critical Design in Context: History, Theory, and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Claudia Mareis, Moritz Greiner-Petter, and Michael Renner (eds.), *Critical by Design? Genealogies, Practices, Positions* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022); Ivica Mitrović, James Auger, Julian Hanna, and Ingi Helgason (eds.), *Beyond Speculative Design: Past – Present – Future*

to say that, beginning from the mid-20th century, several design groups, collectives, and movements such as Italian *Disegno Radicale* in 1960s, the international *Anti-Design* movement in the '70s, *New Design* and *Memphis* in '80s Germany and Italy respectively, and Dutch brand *Droog* from the '90s onwards, to name a few, all sought to openly contest the strictures of conventional industrial, product, and architectural design in a search for alternative, even utopic ways of living and understanding conviviality.[58] These currents no doubt followed very different trajectories, guided as they were by agendas and ideals at times widely diverging from one another, and (like many of their CSD descendants) entertained an often ambivalent relationship with the flows of Capital. As Marjanne van Helvert notes,

> Some of these designers and groups of the late 1950s, the 1960s, and early 1970s were explicitly Marxist, while others celebrated capitalist consumer culture in their work. Some of them fervently rejected Modernism, yet others considered themselves the dutiful heirs of the 'primitives of modern architecture' and regarded their work as the next phase within the development of design.[59]

Still, what many of these groups did share, which contemporary critical and speculative designers likewise went on to pursue, was an attempt to challenge, subvert, or outright reject those perceived to be outdated, dogmatic, and ultimately bourgeois principles of "good design". Chiefly among them, was the functionalist cult of practical efficiency, famously encapsulated in architect Louis Sullivan's maxim 'form ever follows function'[60] and later championed by many

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(Split: SpeculativeEdu, 2021); Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture: 1900 to the Present*, Third ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

58 For more in-depth analyses of 20th century design movements in the West, see: Alex Coles and Catharine Rossi, eds., *The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968-1976* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013); Grace Lees-Maffei and Rebecca Houze, eds., *The Design History Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010); Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008); Sparke, *Introduction*.

59 Marjanne van Helvert, 'Counterculture and Anti-Design: Postmodern Appropriations of Utopia', in *The Responsible Object: A History of Design Ideology for the Future*, ed. Marjanne van Helvert (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2016), 177.

60 Louis Sullivan, 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered', *Lippincott's*

user-centred designers. Designers working within this tradition instead sought to claim their activity as an intellectually sophisticated pursuit that had much more to offer to society than solely technical solutions to mundane problems.[61] Very much in line with broader cultural and economic shifts happening across Western societies, these design practices thus flirted with the lexicon of conceptual art: they experimented with poetic expressivity, narrative, humour, provocation, and symbolism, they repurposed and recombined found or discarded objects through pastiche,[62] frequently finding inspiration in "low" culture, and more generally they espoused alternative aesthetic vocabularies in an effort to alter habitual use experiences and encourage somewhat novel behaviours.

Out of this mix of defiance towards the aridity of commercial problem-solving and promiscuity with the art world, emerged around the turn of the 21st century a flurry of unorthodox approaches to design practice that have since cohered into something of a heterogeneous design canon, the common denominator being a leveraging of design as a means of aesthetic and socio-political critique, commentary, and experimentation, as well as a continued challenge to the equating of use with mere utility. Here below I want to consider a few contemporary expressions of this spirit. However, in doing so, it should be noted that CSD – an unsatisfactory umbrella term that I will nonetheless adopt here for convenience – has been not only meticulously dissected and taxonomized, but also fiercely criticised over the past decade or

Monthly Magazine, 1896.

61 In an important new book, Silvio Lorusso has very insightfully reflected on this 'broadly humanistic turn of design, which makes the designer an intellectual of technics more than a technical intellectual' – a shift that, he goes on to argue, is 'most evident in Speculative Design, also called Critical Design'. Silvio Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion* (Vilnius: Set Margins, 2023), 245, 277.

62 Bernhard Bürdek notes that this somewhat mirrored the cross-disciplinary contamination commenced by artists who 'long beforehand dedicated themselves to working on utility objects', such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. Bernhard E. Bürdek, *Design: History, Theory and Practice of Product Design* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005) 65.

so.[63] Moreover, as design researcher Tobie Kerridge observes, CSD is 'a slippery topic' because the term 'means different things to different people at different times',[64] to the extent that some practitioners whose work could be in one way or another associated with this current either reject the label altogether or have proposed alternative descriptors – e.g., design poetics, design fiction, design for debate, conceptual design, discursive design, etc. Rather than attempting to coherently organise this work into neat and rigid categories, let alone to provide a comprehensive appraisal of the many debates surrounding CSD, I will be focussing here on the different ways in which design employed as an experimental, critical, and/or speculative practice engages with the theme of use.

The popularisation of Critical Design as a relatively formalised mode of practice is to be primarily attributed to the work of academic designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, around whom has revolved a loose but fairly large cohort of researchers and practitioners since

63 A key point of contention is the predominantly Western-centric perspective of much contemporary CSD work. Critics have noted a general lack in CSD of robust analyses of systemic oppression's unevenly distributed effects, which often comes riddled with assumptions about a universally shared present from which the possible futures under scrutiny radiate (cf. Dunne & Raby's famous unacknowledged adaptation of Trevor Hancock and Clement Bezold's 'Future Cone' or 'PPPP diagram' in Speculative Everything, p.5). Furthermore, CSD's alleged externality to the terms of capital accumulation is grossly overstated and often inattentive to academia's participation to the latter. Design researcher Matt Ward has recently produced a very helpful summary of some of the main criticisms levelled against CSD: Matt Ward, 'A Practice of Hope, A Method of Action', in *Beyond Speculative Design: Past – Present – Future*, ed. Ivica Mitrović, James Auger, Julian Hanna, and Ingi Helgason (Split: SpeculativeEdu, 2021), 166–200. Also see: John Thackara, 'Republic of Salivation (Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta)', Design and Violence (MoMA), 19 December 2013; Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell, 'What Is "Critical" about Critical Design?', in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '13* (Paris, France: ACM Press, 2013), 3297–3306; Luiza Prado de O. Martins, 'Privilege and Oppression: Towards a Feminist Speculative Design', in *Proceedings of DRS2014 Design's Big Debates - 16-19 June 2014* (Design's Big Debates, Umeå Institute of Design, 2014), 980–90; Cameron Tonkinwise, 'How We Intend to Future'.

64 Kerridge, 'Designing Debate', 34. Also Mitrović et al., *Beyond Speculative Design*, 73–5.

the early 2000s, initially within the orbit of London's Royal College of Art where the two professors established and ran the influential *Design Interactions* programme until 2015. The qualifier "Speculative", something of a later addition, has been gradually adopted to describe a trait that, however, has arguably been proper to most Critical Design work since day one: a distinctly future-oriented perspective particularly focused on grappling with the potential and ethically challenging effects of new technologies. Let me examine here the type of CSD work developed by Dunne & Raby themselves.

In a nutshell, their point of departure is, as Dunne puts it, a critique of people's 'enslavement ... to the conceptual models, values, and systems of thought'[65] that are lulling us into passive commodity consumption and which is produced and propagated via what they call 'affirmative design: design that reinforces the status quo'.[66] By this they mean mainstream, commercially driven industrial and product design: an immature practice, blindly committed to solving trivially pragmatic problems hence devoid of 'intellectual credibility', which unthinkingly 'reinforces global capitalist values' through the fabrication of false needs.[67] Although Dunne & Raby's stance cannot be straightforwardly described as unmitigated idealism, we will see that their insistence on people's consciousness presents significant repercussions for their approach to use. In terms of their philosophical and political influences, as some commentators contend,[68] echoes of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory – and specifically of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's notion of the "culture industry" – are unmistakeable in Dunne & Raby's writings, despite the authors'

65 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 21.

66 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013) 34.

67 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 59.

68 Bardzell and Bardzell, 'Critical Design'; Simon Bowen, 'Critical Theory and Participatory Design', in *Proceedings of CHI2010 Conference – 10-15 April 2010* (Atlanta, GA, 2010), 10–15.

objections,[69] and the nebulous, unacknowledged shadows of both Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle and Gramscian cultural hegemony appear to loom large too. Scattered nods to the thought of Jean Baudrillard and science fiction novelist J.G. Ballard can also be found sprinkled throughout their three books. Indeed, Dunne & Raby repeatedly lament the social conformity and mass stultification of the subjects of so-called late capitalism, whom they rather condescendingly chastise en masse 'as obedient and predictable users and consumers',[70] for the most part deprived of any agency and disconnected from 'real human needs'[71] because constantly under a spell that goes by the name of 'user-friendliness'.[72]

As an antidote to this alleged bamboozlement, Dunne & Raby – alongside designers such as James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau, Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen, Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, Noam Toran, the Near Future Laboratory, and many others – formulated a mode of designing that instead of striving for product optimisation and efficiency would encourage debate by 'ask[ing] carefully crafted questions and mak[ing] us think'[73] about complex cultural, moral, and political issues – such as social isolation, death and euthanasia, emerging biotechnologies, severe resource depletion, mass-surveillance, as well as the very ideological workings of design itself. This, Dunne & Raby suggest, could be achieved through the creation of speculative scenarios revolving around real yet fictional products – which they describe as 'para-functional', 'post-optimal', and 'user-*un*friendly' – belonging to equally fictional, often vaguely dystopian, yet ultimately plausible futures.[74] A move that, they go on to claim, would in turn 'challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life'.[75] In Dunne and Raby's own words, then,

69 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 35.

70 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 38.

71 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 6.

72 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 21.

73 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 58.

74 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 35-42.

75 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 34.

> Critical design is critical thought translated into materiality. It is about thinking through design rather than through words. [76]

An illustrative example of this approach could be Dunne & Raby's iconic 2007 project *Technological Dreams*, which is part of the permanent collections of New York's *MoMA* and of Paris' *Fond national d'art contemporain*.[77] *Technological Dreams [Fig.1]* explored some of the possible relationships we might develop with robots in the near future by presenting four 'technological cohabitants',[78] each characterised by a specific trait – one is independent, one is nervous, one is vigilant, one is needy – which, in turn, affects their odd, sometimes mischievous behavioural response to a user's interaction.

Now, if leaving aside the questionable wholesale claims about people's supposed passivity and the sanctimonious tone with which these are frequently articulated, Dunne & Raby's recognition of design's ethically thorny role in everyday experience and their related eagerness to explore its applicability beyond merely improving efficiency has been highly generative. Indeed, I think that their contribution to spark a new wave of designerly explorations of complex questions should not be trivialised. Moreover, while the work they have inspired is sometimes culpable of – but also sometimes ventriloquised as[79] – massively overstating CSD's change-making capabilities, particularly "at scale", and while critical and speculative designers' analytic naivety should not be sheltered from robust scrutiny, this is not the aspect of this practice that concerns me here. Once again, it is on Dunne & Raby's peculiar approach to the scene of use that I want to turn my attention, starting by reviewing the way in which they discuss three key elements in their articulation of critical design speculations: that is, the designer, the user, and the designed artefact.

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76 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 35.

77 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, 'Technological Dreams Series: No.1, Robots', 2007.

78 Dunne and Raby, 'Robots'.

79 Essentially, my suspicion is that CSD has been at least in part gaslit by polemicist and commentators into claiming an activist, even revolutionary role that it neither needed nor originally intended to have.

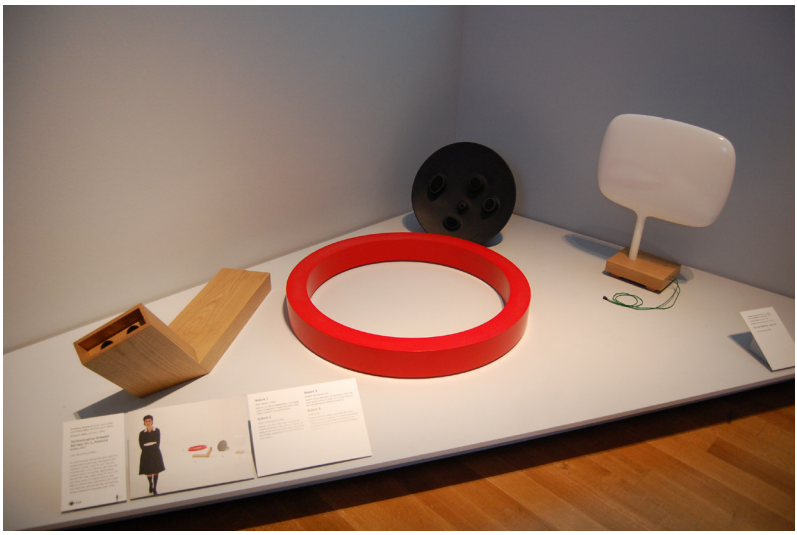

Fig. 1: Dunne and Raby, *Technological Dreams: No.1, Robots*, 2007. Credit: Simon King (2008) [As displayed at *MoMA* New York for the 2008 exhibition *Design and the Elastic Mind*]

Like many of his predecessors, Dunne clearly taps into the lexicon of the art world when he proposes that 'designers could become more like authors' who would be able 'to create alternative contexts of use and need'.[80] As a consequence it should not surprise us if, despite repeated but unconvincing assertions that CSD seeks to invite debate, ask complex questions, and challenge normative futures, Dunne & Raby's work ultimately appears to be more intent on producing captivating yet heavily authored 'arguments or statements'[81] than it is about the actual open *exploration* of issues. As Manning would point out, those asked through this type of work often come across as 'questions that already contain their answer'.[82] Indeed, whether or not Dunne & Raby's "viewers" form diverging responses to speculative what-if

80 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 75.

81 Redström, 'Towards User Design?', 137.

82 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 12.

scenarios and related moral dilemmas does not make the embedded narratives any less "complete" or "concluded" (even in their purported ambiguity).

What about the audiences allegedly addressed by designer-authors, namely CSD's "users"? Dunne & Raby write: 'the user would become a protagonist and co-producer of narrative experience rather than a passive consumer of a product's meaning'.[83] Or, to put it in slightly less marketeering terms: for Dunne & Raby, users of CSD narratives should be encouraged to turn into 'active "imaginers"'.[84] That is, they are to become viewers or 'observers',[85] or even 'conceptual window shoppers'[86] who, upon encountering a given moral dilemma deliberately embedded in the work, 'try things out in [their] minds'.[87] These users/viewers/imaginers would thereby be induced to 'entertain ideas about everyday life that might not be obvious' and to 'construct in [their] minds a world shaped by different ideals, values, and beliefs'.[88] Lastly, for what concerns CSD artefacts, these would supposedly operate by 'forc[ing] a decision onto the user'.[89] A decision that, however, does not need to correspond to, be followed by, or predicated upon any forms of corporeal action. In fact, what Dunne & Raby have in mind is a use that, in keeping with Malpass, features as a rhetorical device within the delivery of artefact-mediated forms of storytelling. It is something of a *vicarious use*.

83 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 46.

84 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 93.

85 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 145.

86 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 140.

87 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 140.

88 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 90–1.

89 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 46.

Fig. 2: Dunne and Raby, *Technological Dreams: No.1, Robots with video*, 2007. © Thibaut Voisin [As displayed at the *Galeries Lafayette* Paris for the 2013-14 exhibition *La Tyrannie des Objets*]

Thanks not only to the textual material but also to the audio-visual support that typically accompanies many CSD projects *[Fig.2]* and which shows the objects being operated by "actors", Dunne & Raby indeed contend that 'We don't actually have to use the proposed products ourselves, it is by imagining them being used that they have an effect on us'.[90] Which is to say that, ultimately, the question of use is here approached not as a matter of physical experience but exclusively as one of detached, contemplative *consciousness*. It is a 'psychological use', as Dunne himself has it.[91] Dunne & Raby therefore insist that these 'are products for the mind ... they are intended to be used in the imagination'.[92] In other words, the artefacts produced through this genre of CSD are 'props for nonexistent films', as Dunne & Raby later described them, which therefore do

90 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 63.

91 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 57.

92 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 64.

not need to be actually operationable because they are not meant to 'mimic reality or allow us to play act but to entertain new ideas'.[93] Unlike the props populating children's playfully 'fictional truths', CSD props are intended to serve as 'fictional propositions'.[94]

On this last point, it is perhaps interesting to contrast Dunne & Raby's take on the use of props with Moten's reflections on the same topic – albeit expressed in relation to conceptual work – which seem to me to point in an almost diametrically opposite and more fruitful direction. Directly inspired by his children's unruly handling of toys, Moten argues that, with props,

> what's most important is that the thing is put in play. What's most important about play is the interaction. [...] In the end, it's the new way of being together and thinking together that's important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or, the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter [a world]; but once you are there, *it's the relation and the activity that's really what you want to emphasise*.[95]

Given Dunne & Raby's paradigmatic handling of the question of use, whereby everything revolves around entertaining new ideas, it should really come as no surprise that the privileged contexts in which this type of work tends to be disseminated and encountered are specialised blogs and the gallery system. Equally unsurprising, this is something for which not only Dunne & Raby, but experimental design work more broadly has caught quite some flak, being accused of amounting to little more than culturally elitist, highbrow entertainment that lacks any connection with and commitment to "real world problems". Beyond Dunne & Raby's version of CSD, many designers either directly involved in or heavily influenced by the

93 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 89, 92. David Kirby famously coined the term *diegetic prototype* to describe fictional technological products especially created for and featured in films – see: David Kirby, 'The Future is Now: Diegetic Prototypes and the Role of Popular Films in Generating Real-world Technological Development', *Social Studies of Science* 40, no.1 (2010): 41-70.

94 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 92.

95 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 106 (emphasis added).

already mentioned Droog Design have similarly been engaged in the production of 'highly expressive'[96] sculptural pieces that are deliberately presented and often 'sold as though [they] were art'.[97] I think it might be worth spending a few words here on the way this hybrid practice, which some commentators have dubbed *design-art* (sometimes *DesignArt*),[98] treats the field of use.

Fig. 3: Studio Glithero, *The Long Drop table installation*, 2009. © Studio Glithero

96 Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 103.

97 Damon Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture and The Boundaries of Function: Communicative Objects, Performative Things', PhD thesis (University of the Arts London and Falmouth University, 2011), 22. As a full disclosure, I should acknowledge that I have done this myself in previous work, as also discussed elsewhere – see Giovanni Marmont, 'Nanopoetics of Use: Kinetic prefiguration and dispossessed sociality in the undercommons', PhD thesis (University of Brighton, 2019), 76–8.

98 See: Alex Coles, *DesignArt: On Art's Romance with Design* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005); Gareth Williams, *Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design* (London: V&A Publishing, 2009); Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture'.

Much like the work more closely associated with the CSD label, design-art creations tend to function as material-based storytelling, albeit with a much less marked emphasis on the future and digital technologies. And much like Dunne & Raby's CSD, such designerly narratives are normally delivered by way of the peculiar, evocative, sometimes uncanny aesthetic of the pieces – but also, in some cases, through a nostalgic foregrounding of craft techniques and a theatricalization of the making process [*Fig.3*] – more so than by constructing unconventional situations of use.

Fig. 4: Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor, *Greystack*, 2004.
© Ralph Ball & Maxine Naylor.

In fact, although design-art artefacts tend to exploit archetypal elements borrowed from the language of furniture and product design, and indeed often 'make the claim to be use objects' – to be, at least in principle, operationable things, as it were – we could argue, with design historian and theorist Damon Taylor, that they are for the most part 'things to be looked at rather than used'.[99]

99 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', xvi, 9.

Practitioners such as Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor avowedly championed this attitude in the service of something they call 'design poetics': a type of concept-driven design that, they say, leaves behind Modernist concerns with efficiency and manufacturing issues, in order to instead 'provide critical, ironic and playful commentary on our condition and our cultures of consumption', thus treating objects 'as cultural information [to] be contemplated' [*Fig.4*].[100]

On the other hand, however, Taylor notes that it would be misguided to regard at least some of these projects simply 'as another expression of the discourse of art', as critic Alex Coles does for instance.[101] Although by and large adopting aesthetic idioms more readily associated with artistic production, Taylor goes on to suggest that much design-art appears to be implicitly interested in interrogating 'the relation between design and use'.[102] He indeed contends that, if taken at face value and incorporated into new visions and practices of everyday life – into what Russian Constructivist Boris Arvatov termed a *'novi byt'* – some of these are objects that could well be 'used as a site of intervention into the ideological and political functioning of our material culture'.[103] And yet, he also concedes that, largely because of *how* and *where* (and arguably *for whom*) these things happen to exist, more so than due to *what* they are, any act of use of these objects must often be 'inferred from the material affordances and physical scripts of the objects'[104] rather than physically experienced. Mainly produced and sold as one-offs, in limited editions, or as artistic installations, not unlike earlier experimental design work[105] these are

100 Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor, *Form Follows Idea: An Introduction to Design Poetics* (London: Black Dog, 2006) 27.

101 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', xv.

102 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', 21.

103 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', 58, 22.

104 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', 27. I will return to the concepts of "script" in Chapter 3.

105 See: Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 87-106; Peter Dormer, *The Meanings of Modern Design: Towards the Twenty-First Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

objects that tend to be unambiguously targeting a market populated by wealthy collectors, curators of high-end galleries and museums, and commercial brands seeking to cultivate an edgier image.[106] To be sure, this is not *just* a class-based grievance about the inaccessibility of this work. Rather, the way this type of design is framed tends to directly affect the way use is treated, too.

Consider two pieces from the *Do Create* series (1999-2000) by Droog Design in collaboration with publicity firm KesselsKramer: Jurgen Bey's *Do Add* chair and Marijn van der Poll's *Do Hit* chair. As Taylor notes, the whole series was exhibited at various venues (such as Milan's Salone del Mobile) with large accompanying images showing each object being used, and then disseminated in the media.[107] *Do Add* [*Fig.5*] is essentially a common stacking chair that had one leg shortened, so that accessing the orthodox function of a chair – sitting – would require the proactive engagement of a user.

Fig. 5: Jurgen Bey for Droog, *Do Add "short-leg" chair*, 1999. © Droog

106 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 16. Also see: Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 103.

107 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 135–6.

Bey appears to be offering a functionally incomplete artefact, ostensibly leaving room for the user to intervene "creatively". However, two crucial and interconnected aspects can be observed. First, *Do Add* was a prototype that never went into commercial production (assuming that was actually the plan) and which has only ever existed as a gallery display – to my knowledge, not permitting physical interaction[108] – or as images circulated via design magazines and blogs. In both cases, the piece is also presented in its "completed" form, with a stack of magazines redeeming the object's deliberate inadequacy in the most obvious way, by returning it to what it was always meant to be: a chair to sit on, nothing more, nothing less. This way, we could be excused for thinking that *Do Add* is ultimately more of a witty material one-liner poking fun at efficiency than a playfully serious encouragement to experience use in unexpected ways. Second, in all accompanying images illustrating the chair, whether in its incomplete or completed state, the *actual use* in its unfolding is never shown but only ever implied through a before and an after.

Conversely, a moment of use *is* featured in Marijn van der Poll's *Do Hit* chair [*Fig.6*]. Also unlike Bey's chair, *Do Hit* did go into commercial production and can still be purchased for an eye-watering price, but the effect is not all that different. The product includes a steel cube and a sledgehammer with which the user is meant to literally bash the cube into the shape of a chair. However, as Taylor notes, although 'the user is required to interact with the design to finish it', once again due to *how* the object is framed and presented 'the options are limited': there is no evidence here that open playfulness is what is actually at stake, so this participatory spirit feels 'little different to the co-opting of the consumer as laborer to

108 For example, see the *Do Add chair* as it was displayed in the 2003 exhibition 'No Design, No Style, Droog Design' at Seoul Arts Center here: https://www.droog.com/projects/no-design-no-style-droog-design/ [Accessed 3rd November 2024] – unfortunately (and somewhat surprisingly, given the nature of both the image and this publication), a hefty fee was requested by the copyright owner for the direct inclusion of this image.

complete flat-pack furniture'.[109] Interestingly, Taylor goes on to claim that, whereas the *Do Hit* chair arguably demands a one-off form of participation, 'the *Do Add*, conversely, operates in such a way that the requirement to act on the part of the user is ongoing; their participation is demanded each time the thing is used'.[110] Particularly in light of our previous discussion of userly creative appropriation, I think this is only true if we renounce straying beyond what the authorial voice of the designer is telling us, for we could keep bashing the *Do Hit* into ever-new shapes while leaving the *Do Add* completed and ready for the next use. Regardless, these reflections raise important questions about openness, play, and participation that are highly relevant to this present exploration and which I will continue examining throughout.

Fig. 6: Marijn van der Poll for Droog, *Do Hit chair*, 1999. © Droog

109 Damon Taylor, 'After a Broken Leg: Jurgen Bey's *Do Add* Chair and the Everyday Life of Performative Things', *Design and Culture* 5, no.3(2013): 370.

110 Taylor, 'After a Broken Leg', 370.

What we can see emerging here as a common thread, weaving together Dunne & Raby's CSD work with design-art pieces such as the ones described above, seems to be a removal of these designs from any actual, physical situations of use in order to preserve the unadulterated coherence of the designer-author's own narrative. This is another dynamic that Ahmed has captured rather lucidly in her meditations on use and, interestingly, one that she connects to the theme of theft discussed in the Introduction in terms of propertisation. Ahmed writes:

> something can be taken out of use *in order to be preserved*. We could think of museums as where objects are stripped of use and put on display. [...] This assumption of the right to withdraw things from other people's use is how some people become the guardians – who often speak of *taking care*. Taking care can mean *taking things*. Thefts are justified as taking care of things by taking them out of use.[111]

Ownership over narrative is, in this case, ownership over (and ultimately against) use.

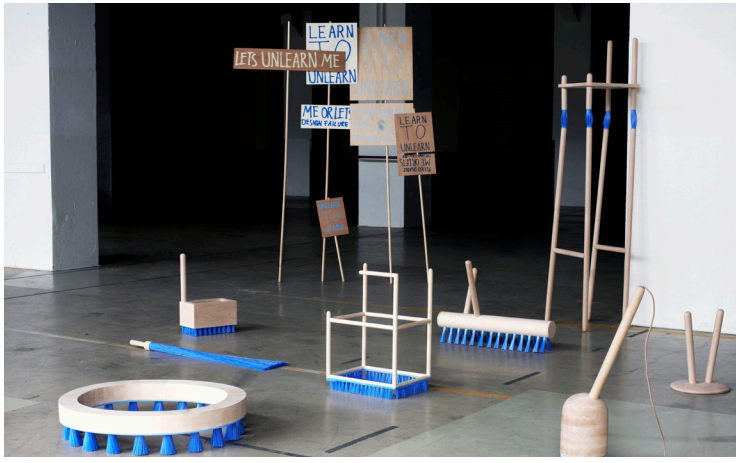

Fig. 7: Lina-Marie Köppen, *Learn to Unlearn series*, 2012. © Lina-Marie Köppen

111 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 33.

Moreover, there is a kind of inherent didacticism at work in these projects that other designers have been trying to resist, one way or another. Take for example Lina-Marie Köppen's 2012 work, revealingly titled *Learn to Unlearn* and consisting of a series of deliberately ambiguous objects [*Fig.7*].

On the one hand, I am not sure if *Learn to Unlearn* has managed to escape the sad black hole of design graduation shows – a defusing limbo at the shores of which washes up a barrage of otherwise promising student interventions, year in, year out – where the bottom line continues to be the production of highly photogenic yet petrified object-based statements more so than the staging of experimental practices of sociality. Regardless, however, what I find really interesting here, beyond a fairly explicit if underexplored positioning of use within the orbit of study, is that while some of the pieces in *Learn to Unlearn* do hint at recognisable actions (sitting, sweeping, illuminating, etc.), Köppen is clearly striving not to overdetermine what exactly people ought to make of these artefacts nor to point to pre-established goals. Instead of demanding an intelligible act of completion in order to unlock a dormant function or reveal a deeper message, these are artefacts that present ill-defined affordances inviting use but ultimately seeking to dwell in incompletion. I will further unpack these ideas and how these tactics undermine the logic of learnification in Chapters 3 and 4. Something similar can also be seen in Jeppe Hein's public space interventions *Modified Social Benches* series [*Fig.8*].

This ongoing project was started in 2005 and counts an impressive, ever-growing number of iterations on the theme of the public "bench". Hein's work hinges on an alteration of archetypal elements in outdoor furniture, making these artefacts at the same time easily identifiable as benches and yet discouraging practices of use conventionally linked to the object "bench". Put differently, Hein' *Modified Social Benches* appear not so much to indicate new yet specific ways of sitting but rather to attempt an opening up of these bench-like artefacts to the radically directionless improvisation of play.

Fig. 8: Jeppe Hein, *Modified Social Benches #11*, 2012. Courtesy of KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin, 303 GALLERY, New York, and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen. Photo: Anders Norrsell

I want to close this section by turning my attention to one last mode of critical design practice that is equally preoccupied with questions of use and playfulness, and which similarly grapples with the theme of learning – whether explicitly or implicitly. That is the work of Bill Gaver and his colleagues in the *Interaction Research Studio* (IRS), formerly based at London's Goldsmiths University and now at Northumbria University. Although Gaver was initially associated and collaborating with Dunne, these researchers have gradually developed a distinctive and, from the perspective of this book, much more compelling approach to the question of use. The main difference between the two currents is perhaps given by the fact that, unlike the almost entirely gallery- or web-based authorial speculations produced by many former and current Royal College of Art affiliates, the IRS have planted *actual* physical engagement with their designs at the very heart of their experimentation. Taylor echoes this observation noting that 'there is a distinctive use phase

in the IRS approach',[112] and indeed their work frequently revolves around the use of what Gaver, in a 1999 article co-authored with Dunne himself and Elena Pacenti, called *Cultural Probes*.

Please take these photos around your home:
Place the number of the image in the box
your name
who lives in your home
the view from your kitchen window
most comfortable place
most uncomfortable place
a possession that's your best friend
something from your childhood
where you keep your odds and ends
a social gathering
your most private object
something you want to get rid of
the first thing you see this morning
the hottest place
the spiritual centre of your home
a place that you like to keep tidy
the view through your letterbox
a collection you own
something red
take a photo at 8pm on a Sunday
Finish off the film with the photos that show us your home...

Fig. 9 Interaction Research Studio, *Example of cultural probe disposable camera*. © Interaction Research Studio

As the three authors originally described them, cultural probes were conceived as a design research tactic, explicitly inspired by the Situationist International and other artistic avant-gardes, consisting of sets of props – typically postcards, maps, and disposable cameras [*Fig.9-10*] – accompanied by a series of tasks and questionnaires involving the use of these items. These miscellaneous packs were 'designed to provoke inspirational responses'[113] from the volunteers and communities they were being distributed to, hence not necessarily with the aim of arriving at 'precise analyses

112 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 170.

113 William Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti, 'Cultural Probes', *Interactions* 6, no. 1 (1999): 22.

or carefully controlled methodologies' but, rather, as 'ways to open new spaces for design'.[114]

Fig. 10: Interaction Research Studio, *Cultural probe items*.
© Interaction Research Studio

In other words, the authors claimed that the data collected through these experiments was not to be *evaluated* as such, nor even meant to provide solutions to pre-established questions, since the primary intention was instead 'to provide opportunities to discover new pleasures, new forms of sociability, and new cultural forms' while, at the same time, 'trying to shift current perceptions of technology functionally, aesthetically, culturally, and even politically'.[115] Nevertheless, responses to the use of the probes appeared to inform quasi-ethnographic observations carried out by the designers that supposedly led to a new research phase and eventually, more or less directly, proved instrumental to the ideation of new design propositions. While Dunne gradually abandoned this methodology, focussing instead on the type of

114 Gaver et al., 'Cultural Probes', 24.

115 Gaver et al., 'Cultural Probes', 25.

work described above, Gaver and colleagues adopted and further developed it as a key element in their design weaponry, pairing it with an emphasis on deliberate aesthetic ambiguity and open-ended situations of use.[116]

Fig. 11: Interaction Research Studio, *ProbeTools collection*, 2018.
© Interaction Research Studio

One fairly recent example of cultural probes is the IRS's project *ProbeTools* (2018) [*Fig.11*]. ProbeTools are a series of open-source customisable 3D printed cameras, to be used as playful props within participatory research processes. In line with the original concept, the cameras are to be distributed to external participants, who are then assigned 'collections of evocative tasks' that involve the use of the probes and other items as a way to 'elicit inspiring responses' around a certain theme or issue.[117] These responses are to be recorded by participants in a variety of ways

116 Gaver et al., 'Ambiguity As a Resource for Design'.

117 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools: Unconventional Cameras and Audio Devices for User Research', *Interactions* 26, no. 2 (2019): 33.

(taking pictures obviously being one of them) and then sent back to the researchers. Interestingly, the IRS state that, 'Important as the probes' material forms are, it is *the design of the tasks* that determines whether or not Probes are intriguing and revealing'.[118] In other words, the IRS's attention appears to be squarely directed toward the actions performed [*Fig.12*], prior to the nature of the props themselves.

Fig. 12: Interaction Research Studio, *ProbeTools in action*, 2018. © Interaction Research Studio

The IRS's reflections on the ProbeTools can be equally helpful in bringing into focus and somewhat preface a significant point of discussion that I will then fully address in the next chapter: the issue of functionality and its relation to use. The IRS suggest that the designed tasks, if they are to be 'rewarding for participants and surprising to researchers', should involve 'playful, open, or even absurd requests'.[119] And this is because, the IRS explain,

> For participants, [playfulness and surprise] undermine ideas about research to encourage informal intimacy and creativity.

118 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools', 34 (emphasis added).

119 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools', 34.

> For researchers, they produce observable evidence with enough uncertainty to leave room for the imagination.[120]

Playfulness is thus identified by the IRS as a fruitful tactic that can be leveraged to balance the dryness of data-driven empirical research and, in so doing, elicit surprising insight. In other words, while the Probes, as we have seen, are of interest only insofar as they enable playful interactions (via the tasks), such interactions appear to be of interest to the IRS *not in themselves* but only to the extent that they are productive of inspiring responses that could then inform, perhaps even indirectly, a subsequent design phase – or an ethnographic study, in the case for example of Gaver's colleague and IRS affiliate Alex Wilkie.[121] This instrumental logic becomes even more evident when the IRS somewhat surprisingly assert that 'clever opportunities for play that don't reveal anything meaningful aren't useful either'.[122] Statements such as this make it clear that, ultimately, it is design and design*ing*, not use, that are the IRS's main concern. Not that there is something troubling about this in and of itself, of course! However, such a teleological and indeed learning-oriented approach to usely playfulness certainly does draw a line between the IRS's work and the studious use that this book explores, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

To be sure, the tension between open-ended playfulness and the extractive applicability of what this mode of acting can unlock is not exactly a blind spot for the IRS, it is not something completely left unthought in the articulation of cultural probes such as ProbeTools. Already in 2004, Gaver and a number of his colleagues were keenly aware of how various deployments of the Probes could alter quite significantly the intended nature of this research method. In an article published that year they noted that, since they were first introduced, cultural probes had been adopted in manners and

120 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools', 34.

121 Wilkie, 'User Assemblages in Design'; Andy Boucher, William Gaver, Tobie Kerridge, Mike Micheal, Liliana Ovalle, Matthew Plummer-Fernandez, and Alex Wilkie, *Energy Babble* (Manchester: Mattering Press, 2018).

122 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools', 34–5.

contexts arguably quite at odds with this tactics' original formulation. Indeed, they wrote,

> there has been a strong tendency to rationalize the Probes. People seem unsatisfied with the playful, subjective approach embodied by the original Probes, and so design theirs to ask specific questions and produce comprehensible results. They summarize the results, analyse them, even use them to produce requirements analyses.[123]

Such an obsession with scientific rationalisation of participants' encounters with these peculiar artefacts – something that has endured to the present day – Gaver and colleagues contended, 'misses the point of the Probes', since they instead 'embod[y] an approach to design that recognizes and embraces the notion that knowledge has limits'.[124] For a practice like design that – whether in pursuit of maximised efficiency, of civic engagement, of aesthetic contemplation, or of thought-provoking dystopianism – seems predominantly and almost inherently traversed by a fascination with decision-making, with learning or teaching something (anything!), the 'purposely uncontrolled and uncontrollable approach'[125] that Gaver and his colleagues describe could bear some real potential for dancing to a different tune, so to speak. A potential that, if it were to be taken to its most extreme conclusions and beyond the remit of the IRS's important contribution, could go quite a long way towards undercutting the scientific appropriation that Gaver et al. warn us about. Indeed, where the latter is 'often justified as "taking full advantage of the Probes' potential", as if, by not analysing the results of our original Probes, we had let valuable information slip away',[126] perhaps the most subversive move is not so much given by a rejection of cold explanatory objectivity in

123 William Gaver, Andy Boucher, Sarah Pennington, and Brendan Walker, 'Cultural Probes and the Value of Uncertainty', *Interactions* 11, no. 5 (2004): 53.

124 Gaver et al., 'Value of Uncertainty', 53.

125 Gaver et al., 'Value of Uncertainty', 54.

126 Gaver et al., 'Value of Uncertainty', 53.

favour of 'empathetically' 'subjective interpretation',[127] as Gaver and colleagues propose. Which is to say, with Moten and returning to what discussed in the Introduction, that 'rather than grasping over value',[128] only of a different kind, what we might want to do is to instead 'structure a sociality centred on the invaluable' – intended not so much as "without value" but as beyond the very logic of valorisation.[129] It is precisely a practice of deliberately "letting valuable information slip away", in the service of a 'ruthless critique of value'[130] and outright disavowal of systems of evaluation altogether (with all difficulties that this clearly entails), that might inform designing for a studious use. A use beyond functionality, beyond interpretation, beyond both subjectivity and objectivity, beyond capture, beyond assertions, beyond learning.

DESIGN AND STUDYING SOCIALITY: INFRASTRUCTURING PARTICIPATION

We have seen that, while much experimental, critical, and speculative design tends to overtly operate at the level of discourse and rhetoric, other adjacent approaches do exist that attempt to push beyond the confines of mere authorial enunciation. As we have seen, this is the case with Gaver and associates' pioneering work, even though it was also noted that people's participation through playful interaction with Cultural Probes appears to be instrumentally subordinated to something of a higher designerly purpose. And although improving efficiency is certainly not what is at stake in their projects, perhaps this insight-oriented logic is something that brings the IRS a bit closer than we might think to the otherwise admittedly very distant work of many UCD practitioners.

127 Gaver et al., 'Value of Uncertainty', 55.

128 Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons* (New York, NY: Sputnik & Fizzle, 2016) 32.

129 Moten, *Poetics*, 32.

130 Moten, *Poetics*, 29.

Fig. 13: Post Work Theatre, *Protesteroo*, 2019. © Post Work Theatre

Participation is also – if differently – key to the work of other designers within the IRS's gravitational field, such as Demitrios Kargotis and Dash Macdonald, known as Dash N' Dem and most recently collaborating with Nicholas Mortimer as *Post Work Theatre*. Dash N' Dem orchestrate public space interventions that examine socio-political themes and current affairs [*Fig.13*], sometimes by inviting spontaneous contributions from selected participants or random passers-by acting and reacting to the designers' work. As they state on their website, Dash N' Dem's practice aims to foster 'political education and engagement', functioning as 'a vehicle for agitation', wherein participants get directly involved in 'a form of activism that provokes diverse audiences to speak out and think critically and creatively'.[131] When looking at some of Dash N' Dem's rather inventive projects, however, we could be excused for wondering if 'audiences' are not actually being mobilised as the *content* of

131 Demitrios Kargotis and Dash Macdonald, 'Dash N' Dem / About', n.d.

the designers' own political activism, and indeed if people's "participation" is best understood in this case as the deputised performance of a very specific idea of citizenship, somewhat didactically championed as the expression of social democratic values. All of this begins to raise several important questions about participation through design; questions that are perhaps necessary to at least glance through, given this book's interest in practices of sociality and desire to look to design as a mode to explore them.

It is difficult to overstate the proliferation, over the past few decades and across all design-related subfields, of methods, processes, and languages centred on the active engagement of people beyond design professionals, to the point that notions of collaboration and participation are now firmly embedded in designerly common sense. Mantras like "designing *with*, not *for*, people" clearly signal an important commitment and positive shift in attitudes but, arguably, they have just as much become tired refrains that many designers feel compelled to recite almost absentmindedly, but also that both NGOs and for-profit corporations are more than happy to feast on. Whether under the guise of Participatory Design (PD), Co-design, or other labels, the involvement of potential "end-users" and so-called lead users, of communities and constituencies of various kinds, of "stakeholders" and of other non-expert contributors in or through design processes has been discussed at great length and through a variety of channels.[132]

While it is widely acknowledged that the 'roots of Participatory Design are deep and broad',[133] its beginnings are conventionally

132 To name but a few, see the biannual 'Participatory Design Conference'; handbooks such as Douglas Schuler and Aki Namioka, eds., *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), as well as, more recently, Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* (London: Routledge, 2013); and the journal 'CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts'.

133 Finn Kensing and Joan Greenbaum, 'Heritage: Having a Say', in *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, ed. Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (London: Routledge, 2013), 21.

understood to 'lie among the various social, political and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, when people in many Western societies demanded an increased say in decision-making about different aspects of their lives'.[134] More specifically, a habitually referenced forerunner of this tendency is the Scandinavian PD current, spearheaded by figures such as Pelle Ehn, which first emerged as an attempt to use design as a means to value the perspective and technical expertise of industrial workers in the shaping of their labouring conditions, rapidly shifting at the time due to technological and organisational innovation. As Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren summarise, PD

> has its roots in the movements toward democratization of work places in the Scandinavian countries. [...] Early Participatory Design projects addressed new production tools, changes in production planning, management control, work organization, and division of labor from users' shop floor perspective.[135]

If this is a common and somewhat unifying origin story of PD as a formal sub-discipline – one that also helps us to genealogically situate the social-democratic inclination persisting today in examples such as Dash N' Dem and others to be discussed below – its collaborative spirit has ramified in multiple directions. John McCarthy and Peter Wright have presented a compelling review of some of the diverging ways in which design projects come to include modes of participation. Mostly writing from a Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) perspective, their methodical assessment alerts us to the fact that,

> Although there is coherence in the category of participatory projects, it should not be imagined as referring to a homogeneous

134 Toni Robertson and Jesper Simonsen, 'Participatory Design: An introduction', in *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, ed. Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

135 Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, 'Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges', *Design Issues* 28, no.3 (2012): 103.

> flat space in which all projects operate at the same level, on the same topics and issues, with the same interests. [136]

Further complexifying this already messy picture, because it is often intuitively associated with 'questions of ethics, politics, democracy and empowerment',[137] as Liam Bannon and Pelle Ehn put it, the topic of participation in design intersects broader sets of discourses interrogating "socially-engaged" practices, design activism, design justice and the politics of representation,[138] to mention a few, often tied to numerous sub-genres and labels describing sometimes overlapping modes of operating. Partly because I want to move on a different register and through categories not traditionally linked to the political sphere (for reasons already mentioned earlier on), rather than untangling these intricacies let me just briefly reflect below on a number of aspects that I think is paramount paying heed to when designing for experimental practices of sociality. Perhaps worth mentioning that some of what discussed below is informed by perspectives and analytic frameworks that, at least to my knowledge, were yet again first developed in the context of art criticism, a lineage that becomes particularly pronounced when moving beyond the most instrumental approaches to participation. Nevertheless, it is my contention that these observations apply across disciplines and that in fact we would have much to lose in overstating or reproducing an art-design chasm.

A first point that must be raised concerns a tendency to naïvely fetishize participation as something intrinsically positive, as we might be tempted to view this notion – as well as related ones such as inclusion and collaboration – in rather vague and indeterminate

136 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 32.

137 Liam J. Bannon and Pelle Ehn, 'Design: Design Matters in Participatory Design', in *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, ed. Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (London: Routledge, 2013), 41.

138 See Resnick (ed.), *Social Design Reader*; Alastair Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World* (Abingdon: Earthscan, 2009); Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

terms. This is likely due, in great part, to an intuitive association of participation with democracy, itself another nebulous, free-floating concept routinely hailed in design milieus as unquestionably good.[139] Douglas Schuler and Aki Namioka, editors of an influential handbook on Participatory Design, draw attention to this link. As they write in the volume's preface: 'People who are affected by a decision or event should have an opportunity to influence it. Participation is the key element in democracy', which in turn means that, in their opinion, 'The most basic motivation [behind participatory design] is the idea of democracy'.[140] This is echoed by community art organiser François Matarasso, who characterised participatory practice as 'a creative and a democratic space in which we can discover, process, understand, organise and share our experience'.[141]

It goes without saying that there are many instances in which participation is indeed, at least at face value, a desirable thing. As already indicated, what drives designers and research teams to seek out and include "external" contributors into a creative process, for example, often appears to be genuine curiosity and an honest commitment to difference. Participation is here conceived as the way design *can* make heard voices that are otherwise routinely ignored or marginalised, the way designers stay attuned to the circumstances, needs, and desires of those ultimately affected by what is being designed. McCarthy and Wright suggest that, ideally, this participatory goodwill *can* find expression through the scaffolding and gathering of voices that are not so much to be *given* as to be *recognised*, voices that are silenced but already there.[142] These, they continue, are to be brought together in the effort of collectively

139 A brief and very lucid reflection on this point from a design perspective can also be found in: Matt Kiem 'If Political Design Changed Anything They'd Make it Illegal: Review Essay on Carl DiSalvo's Adversarial Design', *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no.1 (2013): 35–6.

140 Schuler and Namioka, *Participatory Design*, xii

141 François Matarasso, *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters* (London: Calouste Gulbekian Foundation, 2019), 15.

142 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 25, 154.

exploring open-ended possibilities for relational practices, rather than 'to capture lived experience in order to abstract and reduce it to design requirements'. [143] This broadly positive outlook on the potential for participatory engagement has also been championed by Matarasso: while acknowledging that, 'Like all art, [participatory art] can also be hollow, manipulative, pretentious, trivial and dull', he optimistically contends that 'At its best, participatory art creates a space in which all can speak and be heard, where our pain and our hopes can be shared, where we can build common ground and ways of working together, where our creativity and empathy might find better ways of living'.[144] Moreover, Matarasso emphasises a grassroots approach to the topic by adding: 'In communities left more and more to their own devices, participatory art – and especially community art – might be a valuable tool for building a better future'.[145] Likewise, Social Design theorist Ezio Manzini argues that, through what he refers to as a 'capability approach' to collaborative practices, we can

> move away from the idea of users and consumers seen as passive figures, waiting for someone or something to satisfy their needs, toward the image of subject-actors interested in increasing their own capabilities and who, to this end, actively participate in the production of value.[146]

Now, if all of the above might sound entirely uncontroversial, this is far from always the case. How so?

Many have noted that participation can and often does also have darker sides, irrespective of designers' declared intentions and reasons that might compel them to pursue people's proactive involvement. When Manzini advocates a practice of participatory design for 'social innovation' that would be 'based on a renewed

143 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 20.

144 Matarasso, *Restless Art*, 29.

145 Matarasso, *Restless Art*, 29.

146 Manzini, *Everybody Designs*, 98.

pact between citizens and the state',[147] perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is the famous *'Je participe...'* poster produced by the Marxist collective *Atelier Populaire* during the May 68 wave of revolts in France. As Shukaitis commented, this was meant to mock the French government's cynical efforts to encourage good citizen participation and even self-organisation, provided that these activities could be framed in ways 'amenable to exploitation and control'.[148] This is to say that participation *can* serve to extract profit by taking advantage of participants' voluntary-based and often unpaid contribution, as well as to act as a form of soft power to manage and stabilise dissent. For instance, particularly since the rise of the so-called new economy and sharing economy it is difficult to ignore how, beneath a surface of pseudo-democratic redistributions of agency, participation and collaboration have become mantras underpinning a spirit of entrepreneurial 'DIY, hyper-capitalist collectivism',[149] primarily targeted at the co-creation of value and maximisation of financial gains thus seeking the incorporation in, rather than contestation of, capitalist logics.[150] Frequently trading on tropes of user- or community-driven innovation and creativity, this mode of participation can involve a blatant demand for – when not outright coercion into [151] – 'contribution from participants in the form of unpaid labour' and extreme self-exploitation, thus 'transferring some of the costs of the project to their beneficiaries',[152] and it can also represent more indirect and

147 Manzini, *Everybody Designs*, 15; also cited approvingly in Le Dantec, *Designing Publics*, 5.

148 Stevphen Shukaitis, *Combination Acts: Notes on Collective Practice in the Undercommons* (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2019), 2. Also see Esteva, 'Commoning', i149-50.

149 Stevphen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 110.

150 E.g. see: Björgvinsson et al., 'Participatory Design and "Democratizing Innovation"', 42; Elizabeth B.N. Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, 'Co-Creation and the New Landscapes of Design', *CoDesign* 4, no. 1 (2008): 8.

151 See: Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

152 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 7.

subtle forms of management, manipulation, and indoctrination under the guise of civic empowerment. On this latter point, it has been convincingly argued that participatory endeavours within NGOs and community-level consultations, even when well-meaning, *can* be used for counterinsurgency purposes, facilitating the 'political cooption',[153] fracturing, and "defanging" of antagonistic tendencies.[154]

Addressing these same issues, art theorist Claire Bishop is perhaps one of the most severe critics of wholesale endorsements of participation in the art context, and particularly of the related assumption that 'participation is synonymous with collectivism, and thus inherently opposed to capitalism'.[155] Indeed, not only she charged many proponents of participatory art with political ambiguity – including Matarasso and particularly Nicholas Bourriaud, who I will discuss later on. More importantly, Bishop also observes how in the UK ostensibly participatory rhetoric and policies have often been paired with, and instrumental to, the simultaneous dismantling of welfare provisions in favour of an all-encompassing logic of privatisation. What this means in concrete terms is that superficial, marginally ameliorative, or 'cosmetic' forms of tokenistic, entirely symbolic, and ultimately inconsequential inclusion within institutions *can* be leveraged to give the false impression that something is being done to challenge various forms of structural neglect and systemic marginalisation[156] – something that universities have merrily championed. Moreover, meanwhile and as seen in Chapter 1, costs and responsibilities for any failures in *actually* addressing inequality fall onto the shoulders of those subjects who had been ostensibly included. In relation to this question of shallow or instrumental inclusion through participation, Bishop has formulated a concept that can very effectively illuminate a tendency extending well beyond

153 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 7.

154 E.g., see: INCITE! (ed.), *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007).

155 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 4. Also see Táíwò, *Elite Capture*.

156 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13; also see McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 150.

the field of performance art with which her assessment was concerned: something she labelled 'delegated performance'. With this term, Bishop means to describe

> the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions.[157]

While Bishop identifies various manifestations of this tendency, some where this process is experienced live and others where it is choreographed and recorded for videos and documentaries, she contends that artists deploying forms of delegated performance often invite 'people to perform their own socio-economic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) a profession'.[158] Bishop highlights the very real risk of this method leading to reification and exploitation of people's identities – a risk self-consciously thematised by some of the performance artists featured in her examination[159] – given how such identities are deployed as the material and medium to convey the artists' (or indeed the designers') own authorial message, commentary, or narrative. Moreover, delegated performances can constitute a transactional form of participation whereby 'the artist outsources authenticity' and sets up 'a situation that unfolds with a greater or lesser degree of unpredictability' but does so within the framework of 'a highly authored situation'.[160] This is a point particularly worth underscoring in relation to previous reflections on design, play, and open-endedness. Indeed, Bishop continues, delegated performance occurs when

157 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 219.

158 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 219.

159 For example, Bishop discusses an 'inflammatory' 1999 project by Santiago Sierra, self-explanatorily titled *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, which intended to draw attention to how economic deprivation leads people to humiliatingly accept having their bodies irreversibly turned into a canvas in exchange for a fee. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 222–3.

160 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 237.

> the artist both relinquishes and reclaims power: he or she agrees to temporarily lose control over the situation before returning to select, define and circulate its representation. Authenticity is invoked, but then questioned and reformulated.[161]

It should not require too great of a cross-disciplinary leap to notice potential signs of delegated performance in some of the examples of design practice discussed up to this point. Bishop's framework perhaps invites us to ask, with McCarthy and Wright, whether participants in design interventions are 'positioned as subjects or objects in a project, as creative people making things happen' or conversely, whether consciously or not, 'as instruments for realising the [even well-meaning] ambitions of others'.[162]

Now, something that many approaches to PD seem to share is a determination, in Ehn's words, 'to ensure that existing skills could be made a resource in the design process'.[163] Or, put differently, the wish of capitalising – not necessarily or not directly in monetary terms – on the insight and skills provided by the involvement of a plurality of perspectives so as to achieve a better and/or more democratic *result*. That is to say, much like with the approach taken by Gaver and colleagues encountered earlier on, but also by more mainstream UCD, participation is more often than not pursued as something "valuable" *because* something can be learnt, because something can be improved, because something or indeed someone can be more properly understood, represented, catered for.[164] Even McCarthy and Wright's nuanced engagement with the politics of participation does not inhibit them from enthusiastically referring to participatory practices as being driven by an '*exploitation* of differences'.[165] Of course, this may simply be clumsy

161 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 237.

162 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 9.

163 Pelle Ehn, 'Participation in Design Things', in *Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design 2008* (Indiana University, 2008), 94.

164 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 19.

165 McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 20.

wording. Nevertheless, I would argue that it might also indicate the underlying instrumental logic of improvement, the explicitly productivist proclivity, the impulse towards learnification that so habitually begets and justifies participation.[166] When this is the case, the emphasis remains anchored to whatever is considered to be the *outcome* brought about by a collective process, to what participation leads or is expected to lead to: a product, an environment, a service, but also awareness, education, some kind of knowledge, a decision, a solution to a problem, etc. In other words, these are instrumental collaborations – in a literal more so than ethical sense – either informing a subsequent design phase or whereby the act of participating and the result of that very participation can be neatly distinguished. Participation is a means to an end.

To be clear, I am not at all suggesting that goal-oriented collaboration in design (and beyond) is invariably pernicious and to be avoided. Some of the practices described by McCarthy and Wright, for example, are in fact commendable in their empowering ambitions. However, I think there is an important general distinction that can and should be made here between this unambiguously productivist perspective on participation – one whereby 'the roles of designers and users' are momentarily folded into a single figure,[167] the user-as-designer – and the one this book seeks to foreground, which instead sees collective processes and practices of sociality as themselves the objective hence, at least in principle, not *motivated* by a higher or ulterior aim. Another way of putting this would be to consider the locus of participation in relation to design activities, thereby distinguishing between participation *in* or *to* a design process, on the one hand, and participation *through* design, on the other hand. Or better still, perhaps: distinguishing between design as sociality (i.e., socialising design) and designing for sociality, including the general sociality of use undercutting individuation that this book tries to experiment with (i.e., socialising use). While historically

166 See McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part*, 15.

167 Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 150.

most attention has been focused on the former mode (participation in design, socialising design processes), a somewhat burgeoning design current has emerged in the last decade, at times overlapping with CSD, that has taken seriously this distinction and pursued the latter approach to participation (participation through design, design for sociality), particularly under the rubric of *making publics*.

Fig. 14: Kat Jungnickel et al., *The Dewey Organ, ProtoPublics*, 2015. © Kat Jungnickel

This mode of practice primarily entails crafting material conditions or "platforms" that could (then) be conducive to new processes and spaces of sociality and facilitate experiments in 'collective action'.[168] The main intellectual impetus behind this approach to design for participation is an argument first formulated by American pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey: that so-called publics tend to form through and around discussion of problems perceived as pressing to otherwise disjoined constituencies. Publics, according to this view, are indeed fluid groupings

168 Le Dantec, *Designing Publics*, 5.

that do not pre-exist but rather emerge out of bottom-up participatory exploration of specific issues. Partly building on Dewey's insight, Bruno Latour's later emphasis on the materiality actively undergirding such public-making processes was then particularly well-received in design research milieus.[169] A case in point is a 2015 experiment evocatively titled *The Dewey Organ [Fig. 14]*, part of the broader *ProtoPublics* social design project initiated by Guy Julier, Lucy Kimbell, and Leah Armstrong. According to the dedicated blog, the key question for this project was: 'what counts as a social "problem" and what publics do problems bring into being?'.[170] In order to unpack this question, a team again mostly comprised of IRS-adjacent design researchers and led by Kat Jungnickel created a rather peculiar-looking machine – the "organ" – that was meant to 'render issues tangible, material and debatable in new ways': which is to say, to somewhat materialise otherwise abstract issues.[171] The participatory element here consisted of

> Play[ing] the organ in a context where members of publics can interact with, add or make their issues, problematize and customize problems and in doing so make their publics known or indicate new publics that arise around new issues.[172]

What is most interesting here, I think, beyond the organ's aesthetics or technical functioning as a designed artefact, but also beyond the evaluation of its results, is that the aim was explicitly not to answer any questions nor to produce fairly didactic designerly commentary (perhaps through delegated performance) but, rather, to offer material opportunities for people to actually *craft* questions by themselves, as an open-ended activity, and to reflect on (or,

169 Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public', in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) 14-41.

170 Katrina Jungnickel, Duncan Fairfax, Jen Ballie, and Alex Wilkie, 'The Dewey Organ: a problem and public making machine', *ProtoPublics* (2015).

171 Jungnickel et al., 'Dewey Organ'.

172 Jungnickel et al., 'Dewey Organ'.

perhaps, to study) what the very crafting of questions does to participants. Additionally, while it is rarely clear where the debate that a lot of CSD work claims to be generating is meant to actually happen (when it is happening at all) if not online, as Tonkinwise contends,[173] due to its deliberately media-friendly circulation and predominantly blog-based consumption, the debate staged by participatory design projects like the Dewey Organ is at least in principle intended to revolve around physical, situated, live encounters.

Increasingly, some practitioners and theorists have been framing design interventions like the Dewey Organ as practices of *infrastructuring*. This is a helpful term, the adoption of which in the context of this book, however, needs some clarifying and situating. As Anja-Lisa Hirscher and Ramia Mazé note, '"Infrastructuring" has become a key concept through which contemporary PD has developed notions of use and users'.[174] It comes to design research by way of Ehn,[175] who was himself inspired by the influential work of sociologist Susan Leigh Star. Writing in collaboration with Geoffrey Bowker, Star contended that an infrastructure is 'a platform of sorts', since it is what both underpins and is embedded in 'other structures, social arrangements and technologies', enabling their operation.[176] However, Star and Bowker also warned us that this common-sense understanding may run the risk of misrepresenting infrastructures as stable and well-defined systems, thereby losing sight of what, in their account, distinguishes a structure from an *infra*structure. The latter, Star clarified in an earlier work with Karen Ruhleder, is 'a fundamentally relational concept' and is therefore not identifiable as a fixed "what" – a thing or even set of things – but only as a

173 Tonkinwise, 'How We Intend to Future', 179–80.

174 Anja-Lisa Hirscher and Ramia Mazé, 'Stuff Matters in Participation: Infrastructuring a Co-sewing Café', *The Journal of Peer Production* 13 (2018): 2.

175 E.g., Ehn, 'Participation in Design Things', 92–101.

176 Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker, 'How to Infrastructure', in *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Social Consequences of ICTs (Updated Student Ed.)*, ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (London: Sage, 2006), 230–1.

"when": a situated, emergent, and thus changeable configuration[177] With this in mind, we can better appreciate characterisations of infrastructur-ing approaches to PD 'as fluid and dynamic structure of participation',[178] to use Hirscher and Mazé's words. Central to this mode of designing, which Ehn and colleagues described as a necessarily 'ongoing process',[179] is a deliberately high degree of indeterminacy and openness in terms of who will participate, when, and in pursuit of what ends. Rather than a form of rigid social engineering, Christopher Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo therefore propose that design as infrastructuring is a 'scaffolding'[180] endeavour that is preoccupied with constructing material conditions which can *set participatory activities in motion*, without aiming to prescribe the nature of that participation, but also irrespective of the magnitude and scale of the effects produced.

This kinetic aspect of infrastructuring in particular, this "setting in motion" of participatory processes, is something I wanted to take very literally in the present investigation. Anthropologist Brian Larkin frames this quality rather plainly, when he writes that 'Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter', which means that while "things can be constitutive parts of infrastructural arrangements, infrastructures are first and foremost 'the relation between things'.[181] Moreover, the great, late affect theorist Lauren Berlant underscores the centrality that use, as a motional activity, has in the ontology of infrastructures. Indeed, Berlant contends that, because an infrastructure 'is the living mediation of what organises life', it can only be 'defined by

177 Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, 'Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces', *Information Systems Research* 7, no. 1 (1996): 113.

178 Hirscher and Mazé, 'Stuff Matters', 3.

179 Björgvinsson et al., 'Participatory design and "democratizing innovation"', 43.

180 Christopher A. Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo, 'Infrastructuring and the Formation of Publics in Participatory Design', *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 2 (2013): 260.

181 Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no.1 (2013), 329.

use and movement', rather than in its own right (e.g., in terms of design, designing, or designed products).[182] Returning to a design context, this also explains Le Dantec and DiSalvo's suggestion that, as far as infrastructuring is concerned, 'the deployment of the technology is a beginning, not an end', so whatever physical artefacts is designed as part of the intervention 'might serve as a catalysing factor' rather than as the outcome.[183]

Now, there is one final point I would like to raise regarding infrastructuring. It has repeatedly been argued that design represents nothing less than 'the operative undercurrent of the everyday',[184] as theorist Abby Mellick Lopes amongst many others suggested. This, in turn, has understandably led many to emphasise the inherent and profound politicality of design, in the words of design philosopher Tony Fry. Indeed, this is a practice which 'gives material form and directionality to the ideological embodiment of a particular politics', despite design being an otherwise 'marginal figure on the agenda of institutional politics',[185] according to Fry, but also in spite of the commercial design sector's and a sizeable portion of design education's longstanding attempts to construct an image of it as 'seemingly innocuous and a-political'.[186] Fry has been perhaps the most vocal and forceful proponent of this emphasis on design's politics, particularly in relation to sustainability or, as he calls it, sustainment. In an influential book titled *Design as Politics*, for example, he argued that design is a 'silent structuring agency' which performs as a 'directive force'.[187] A force that, according to Fry, should be acknowledged and ultimately repurposed in the service of

182 Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (1 June 2016): 393.

183 Le Dantec and DiSalvo, 'Infrastructuring and the Formation of Publics', 258.

184 Abby Mellick Lopes, 'The Politics of Design Conversations', in *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One*, ed. Anne-Marie Willis (Ravensbourne: Team D/E/S Publications, 2004), 74.

185 Tony Fry, *Design as Politics* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 6, 11.

186 Lopes, 'Politics of Design Conversations', 74.

187 Fry, *Design as Politics*, 6, 11.

a 'dictatorship of sustainment', as we read in the earlier and equally significant *Design Futuring*.[188] I want to leave aside here Fry's authoritarian, techno-Leninist tendencies,[189] which I can only speculate to be the product of frustration towards "collective action" being so often coded in design as insubstantial public debate or purely discursive "agonism". What I want to focus on instead is how an insistence on the terms and liturgies of the political, as a quintessentially decisional sphere of sovereignty, is arguably more conducive to the production of 'material assertion'[190] and to modes of structuring than it is to open-ended, exploratory *social* infrastructuring. Although Fry's own (design) politics do trouble me, by highlighting this distinction – which could be schematised as one between the sovereign politics of design structuring and the 'nonsovereign'[191] sociality of design infrastructuring – I merely want to try to explore a different route, to operate on a different register, to adopt a different vocabulary, and see where that takes us. Very much like in my earlier discussion of commoning and friendship, I am conscious of the fact that promising overlaps and alignments do exist with authors committed to the terms of politics but also critical of its oppressive inclinations, such as Arturo Escobar – and particularly his articulation of 'autonomous design'.[192] Nevertheless, I want to invite designers to see what opportunities might arise when our intent is no longer that of '"doing politics differently", but of doing something different from politics'.[193] I will return to this aspect at the end of the book, in my reflections on prefiguration.

188 Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, ethics and new practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 48.

189 As noted, for instance, in Damian F. White, 'Ecological Democracy, Just Transitions and a Political Ecology of Design', *Environmental Values* 28 (2019): 46.

190 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', xv.

191 Berlant, 'Commons', 402.

192 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

193 Invisible Committee, *Now*, 52.

3
Use

The knobby baby stood up. His face was a glare of sunlight and anger. His diapers were about to fall off. "Mine!" he said in a high, ringing voice. "Mine sun!". "It is not yours," the one-eyed woman said with the mildness of utter certainty. "Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it you cannot use it."

Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 2002 [1974]: 26

What would it mean to take the remark in the epigraph above – 'if you will not share it you cannot use it' – uttered by one of Ursula K. Le Guin's characters in her classic 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, not simply as a general admonition, not as an arbitrary prohibition but, more fundamentally, as a concrete operational impossibility? In other words, what if that "cannot" were to point to an understanding of use implying and, in fact, inevitably *requiring* a peculiar type of sharing? Moreover, what if we were to now read the same remark with Giorgio Agamben, who proposes that 'the relation of use [...] constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted'?[1] It is by following this line of questioning that the present chapter attempts to reformulate use itself as a practice through which what is ultimately shared is first and foremost an otherwise bounded, propertied sense of self: a practice of *being* shared that can be amplified, rendered perceivable, and indeed studied through use.[2]

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015 [2014]),33-4.

2 It might be tempting to infer a certain proximity between the approach to use being developed here and influential interventions in design studies centred on the notion of 'ontological design', such as Anne-Marie Willis, 'Ontological Designing', *Design Philosophy Papers* 4, no.2 (2006): 69–92. However, the reconfiguration of use I am wrestling with is preoccupied not so much with what lies *within* ontology, nor properly against it either, but rather before and underneath ontology's partitioning, indexing, and ultimately derivative capture of what is already shared: an ante-ontological use, as Moten might put it. See: Fred Moten, 'The Subprime and the Beautiful', *African Identities* 11, no.2 (2013): 237–45.

This rearrangement of use will first of all involve delinking it from an emphasis on the subjectivity of usership as well as, most importantly, from the functionalist and purely instrumental inflections it is so commonly associated with. Reconsidering use itself with greater clarity, unburdened by the individuating connotations and ambiguities that regularly haunt it, might allow us to then reorient and rehearse this sphere of action on radically different terms, by linking it instead to other frameworks, to other imaginaries, to other ways of sensing and practising sociality. This second part of the process will largely hinge here on Agamben's multifaceted radicalisation of use, charting how this category has been reinterpreted throughout his writings. I would argue that no one has paid more sustained attention to use nor has invested this notion with more philosophical currency than Agamben. Indeed, over a twenty-year span, he has examined the category of use from a variety of angles, mostly in relation to juridical, theological, and linguistic articulations, picking apart several established dichotomies – such as sacred and profane, means and end, potentiality and actuality, production and destruction – in order to show how, in each case, use is that sphere which ultimately collapses them. As we shall see, my sense is that Agamben's elaboration essentially invites us to rethink use as the combination of a certain *how* and a certain *with* – a certain modus operandi and a certain sociality – that jointly point us towards modes of action disconnected from a deep-rooted logic of intentional agency. This way, use emerges reprogrammed, so to speak, neither as the expression of unencumbered individual self-determination nor as the concerted effort of networked "agents" but, rather, as an event that complicates clear-cut distinctions between effecting and affected, active and passive, subject and object.

I should underscore that I am not aiming for exhaustiveness in my engagement with Agamben's writings. Across his body of work, Agamben has weaved a complex web of interconnected concepts that are admittedly best grasped within the context of his broader project, the full extent and genealogy of which, however,

are not something this book is concerned with.[3] Noting how Agamben has been up to this point a decidedly marginal figure in design-related literature,[4] my more modest hope is that a close reading of his work can offer new and precious conceptual tools for designerly experimentation. More generally, while Agamben's tone or, in fact, even my own might at times suggest a preoccupation with something like an onto-epistemology of use – with redefining what use *actually* is or how it *ought* to be understood everywhere, thereby correcting "wrong" formulations – or perhaps with a normative view on it – with what we should and must do with use – this book is instead mostly interested in asking what *else* use can be or, indeed, what else it can *do*, to put it in Spinozan terms.[5] It asks what use is "capable of", what other modes of use can we study, and study in. It explores use in a different key, as a sphere of general entanglement. In this sense, perhaps I want to read Agamben's helpful propositions through a perspective that acknowledges what Ahmed also noted, in her discussion of queer use: that 'there are many uses of use in contemporary culture and

3 For some valuable reflections on different but complementary aspects of Agamben's investigation of use, primarily in relation to the notions of form-of-life, habit, and potentiality, see Valeria Bonacci, 'Form-of-life and Use in Homo Sacer', *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 3 (2020): 217–45.

4 To my knowledge, not more than a handful of studies have engaged with Agamben's thought in relation to design beyond passing mentions, and it is only in the work of urban design scholars Boano and Talocci (2014) that Agamben's preoccupation with use has been picked up, but not directly thematised. See: Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci, 2014. 'Agamben's Gesture of Profanation and the Politics of Play in Urban Design', *Design Philosophy Papers* 12, no.1 (2014): 65–95; Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci, 'Inoperative Design', *City* 21, no.6 (2017): 860–71; Peter Buwert, 'Potentiality: The Ethical Foundation of Design', *The Design Journal* 20, sup1 (2017): S4459–S4467; Tony Fry, 'Re-Turning: Sacred Design III', *Design Philosophy Papers* 8, no.1 (2010): 25–34; Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Design-Politics: An Inquiry into Passports, Camps, and Borders* (Malmö: Malmö University, 2016).

5 In a famous 1978 lecture, Deleuze argues that 'Spinoza [...] never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what's in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty'. See: Gilles Deleuze, 'On Spinoza's Concept of Affect (lecture transcript) – Cours Vincennes 1978', trans. Timothy S. Murphy, Webdeleuze, 24 January 1978.

thought' which are not so much lost in today's practices as unseen, underappreciated, suppressed.[6]

Throughout this elaboration, I will weave together some of the theoretical threads encountered by composing a few conceptual knots, which will act as incremental coordinates and will be signalled as such.

Part I: Use beyond common sense

DECOUPLING USE AND USER

If we are to substantially reconsider the sphere of use in light of this book's focus on concrete material practices, it could be helpful to present some preliminary reflections on the way that use is frequently treated as the contentious meeting point between the categories of the human (primarily figuring as a user) and the artificial or technological.[7] More specifically, I would like to address a few interrelated issues that commonsense conflations of the *scene* of use with the *subjectivity* of usership, as well as procedural and conceptual prioritizations of the latter over the former, can give rise to.

A first important aspect to take into account – and in many ways a major throughline in this book – concerns *agency* as an interpretative framework for this human-technological endeavour we call use. On this question, an important shift, particularly well-received in design milieus, has been the way various social and political theorists have invited us to recognize that the artefactual is a much more complex reality than a mere stream of inert, ever-compliant

6 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 232 n7.

7 It goes without saying that picking apart in any great detail the category of the human itself and the various roles this figure has played throughout history, often in opposition to other categories such as technology, but also the animal, is an effort far exceeding the scope and focus of this book. For readers interested in the subject, race theory and posthumanist thinking are arguably two of the most prominent sites where important critiques of the quintessentially Modern category of the human have been developed.

utility tools at the human's disposal. This has meant attending, for example, both to artefacts' obstructive 'recalcitrance'[8] as well as to their lively, powerfully generative 'vibrancy',[9] as political theorist Jane Bennett calls this thingly force. Equally, it has meant attending to artefacts' *performative* quality by noticing how, in Taylor's terms, these appear to 'act upon us as we use them and ... contain in their being the protocols and disciplinary forces of their time'.[10] In other words, at a very basic level and according to this view, artefacts 'might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on', as Latour famously noted.[11] This theoretical move has often championed a splintering, redistributing, and thus (re)socialising of agency, which ceases to be conceived as the sole property of an all-powerful human subject – of a user – and is instead rearticulated as a common effort carried out by 'an association between entities', some human some nonhuman.[12] Through this wider view, frequently referred to as a "material turn" in the humanities, we can better appreciate the extent to which, as Agamben argues, 'there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, *contaminated*, or

8 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 1.

9 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii.

10 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', i. Unlike other theorists of design interested in performativity, such as Kristina Niedderer and more recently Gareth Williams, who attribute this performative quality only to a particular class of specifically designed artefacts, Taylor draws on Judith Butler's work and convincingly disputes instead that *all* artefacts – some more explicitly than others – can be performative because *all* artefacts can and do pragmatically guide and ideologically code our actions. See: Kristina Niedderer, 'Designing Mindful Interaction: The Category of Performative Object', *Design Issues* 23, no. 1 (2007): 3-17; Gareth Williams, 'Towards a Theory of Performative Design: Writing about Design and Designers since 1990', PhD Thesis (Kingston University, 2016).

11 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

12 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 65. It is here appropriate to underscore how Latour has often adopted, whether metaphorically or not, the language of parliamentary democracy to discuss his ideas around human and nonhuman agency.

controlled by some apparatus', by technology broadly understood.[13] We will want to mark the word 'contaminated' most emphatically here, since the present argument will circle back to it in due course.

Now, it is worth noting that accounts of use in terms of (technological) negotiations and distributions of agency for the most part tend to imply the participation of pre-existing "agents", each endowed with a speck or variable degree of said agency. Consequently, according to this paradigm, *having* agency over action (over use) means being more or less capable of impressing the 'thrust of our own intentionality' on the action's unfolding, as Erin Manning suggests.[14] It means possessing the ability to at least in part influence and direct the outcome of that action, and thus being capable of identifying that action as (also) *my* action, as something that comes from me and that therefore, in a way, *belongs* to me (even if in co-ownership). In distinguishing agency from efficacy (the latter naming a more generic 'capacity to effect change'), sociologist Jenny L. Davis describes the former in even stronger terms, writing that 'agency refers to the capacity to *inflict will*'.[15] In any case, this is why Manning identifies the notion of agency, whether or not mobilised to 'give voice to those silenced', as part of a triptych that, she argues, is 'the very backbone of a concept of individuality': namely, what she calls the 'volition-intentionality-agency triad'.[16] Ultimately, Manning concludes, 'agency, as tied to intention and will, has served not to bestow power but to *parse the world into subjects and objects*', into those who have agency and those who do not,[17] those capable and those incapable of *discretely* 'making a difference', in Latour's words.

13 Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is an Apparatus?', in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009 [2006]), 15 (emphasis added).

14 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 120.

15 Jenny L. Davis, *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 46 (emphasis added).

16 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 16.

17 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 130 (emphasis added).

[18] That is to say: agency as separation. This wariness is also echoed by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who writes:

> Just because not everything happens according to one's own volition does not, however, mean that someone else is in charge, or that agency is more widely distributed. It means, rather, that there must be something wrong with an account of action which presumes that whatever happens to us is an effect of some agency or other. [19]

At a more fundamental level still, presenting use in these terms, as something of an *encounter* between associated agents or 'actants' – in keeping with Latour's parlance[20] – also runs the risk of potentially treating the scene of use as a momentary violation of the human's discreteness with respect to the technological. Such a violation ostensibly marks either the human's degradation or its emancipation, depending on one's proclivity for techno-phobic ("don't use!") or techno-utopian ("use better!") accounts, respectively. For how diametrically opposed these perspectives might superficially appear, they both inevitably rely on the idea that something of a pre- or non-technological human being has existed or could exist. This is because both are wedded to a concept of human *interiority*, both are ultimately consumed by a connected preoccupation with mastery or lack thereof, and both are often propped up by myths of technological rupture: a usely rupture, so to speak, propelling the human from a prior natural condition to a contemporary technological one. Indeed, these narratives, aided by the exceptionalisation of the latest digital innovations,[21] go hand

18 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.

19 Tim Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence: On Human Correspondence', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 1 (March 2017): 17.

20 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.

21 This shows up as a pervasive tendency in popular imaginaries that associates the category "technology" exclusively with electronic products, computational devices, digital information systems, algorithms, and so on – that is to say, colloquially speaking, with "high-tech" and technology's proximity to scientific advancements. While this is in many ways a reasonable response

in hand with the project of asserting individuals' self-contained wholeness and ontological autonomy discussed earlier on. Media scholar Florian Cramer describes this quite effectively as a 'fiction of agency' that, in line with Manning's above remarks, he links to 'the very notion of the self-made':[22] a delusion that we have seen to be integral to the continuous reproduction of the self-possessed, independent individual.

My sense is that a similar concern can explain the frequent ostracising of the figure of the user in design-related discourses, where efforts abound to protect the individual human subject not only from creeping social engineering tendencies (as found in so-called nudging or behaviour change approaches), but also from what is seen as a more general and ultimately demeaning artificiality of use. Design researchers Julka Almquist and Julia Lupton, for instance, argued that 'the idea of the user [is] a concept that has at once hollowed the human subject and reduced subjectivity to the exercise of a function'.[23] An even clearer example of this humanist stance is represented by the work of design

to the undeniable significance of this type of technology, such a perspective also risks producing a problematic exceptionalisation. It can, in other words, obfuscate or even naturalise the powerful role of more humble non-computational technologies within social life. When reconsidered from this standpoint, then, an item of clothing, a mug, a pencil, a chair, a book, a bicycle, and so on, should all legitimately fall into the category of technological apparatuses just as much as, say, an LCD screen, a barcode reader, or a dating app do. To be clear, this is not intended to minimise the distinctive impact that things such as smartphones, the Internet, CCTV and body cameras, 3D printers, drones, algorithmic computation, Big Data, and so on *do* have on us. Nor should this be taken as the manifestation of a traditionalist nostalgia for artisanal, pre-industrial, pre-digital life. Quite the contrary, avoiding selective exceptionalisations is meant to draw attention to and challenge a fantasy of sovereignty that bolsters that very nostalgia, for instance by bemoaning Big Tech's surveillance technologies as an assault on individuals' inviolable, castle-like privacy through algorithmic aggregation and manipulation of our supposedly autonomous opinions and desires.

22 Florian Cramer, 'What Is "Post-Digital"?', in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, ed. David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 25.

23 Almquist and Lupton, 'Affording Meaning', 4-5.

theorist Johan Redström. In an oft-cited 2006 article, Redström presents what may seem like an uncontroversial perspective, as he claims that 'people, not users, inhabit the world'.[24] This assertion allows him to leverage an important critique towards designers' attempts at controlling people's interpretation of and interaction with artefacts, thereby turning purportedly user-centred design into 'user design'.[25] In fact, Redström contends that 'a "user" is something that designers create' or, at best, something that a person 'becomes' *only after* 'turn[ing] to an object, inviting it to be a part of her lifeworld', and 'decid[ing] to start using it for some purpose'.[26] However, I think that this prioritisation of personhood over usership is unconvincing.

For a start, it is grounded in a dubious binary opposition of subjects and objects, of persons and things, as ontologically autonomous entities, which should not remain unexamined here. When we read that 'the concept of a "user"', as Redström indeed continues, 'is based on an object-centric perspective, the person defined in relation to the object',[27] we can see how this perspective insinuates the existence of a human subject somewhat uncontaminated by its relation to technological "objects", of a natural subjective interiority that is utterly distinct from and prior to the objective exteriority of the world, and above all of the artificial world. Contrary to this claim, I will try to propose below that, in fact, there is no person prior to a user or, more accurately, prior to use: that is, there is no subject that first inhabits the world and *then* interacts with it by becoming a user of (technical) objects, simply through acts of volition no less. Moreover, I will contend that this is not to imply the pre-existence

24 Redström, 'Towards User Design?', 129. Note that since the publication of this article Redström's position does not appear to have significantly shifted in this respect, given that the same argument is reiterated almost verbatim in his more recent book – see Johan Redström, *Making Design Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 75.

25 Redström, 'Towards User Design', 129.

26 Redström, 'Towards User Design', 129.

27 Redström, 'Towards User Design', 129.

of a user-person that *then* uses either but, rather, that whatever we perceive as distinct subjects of practices of use might be better understood as provisional, post-facto effects of those very practices. Noting that 'use involves a way of arranging worlds as well as ourselves', Sara Ahmed beautifully expresses a similar view when she writes that 'We are in this sense already "in use" before we pick up objects; to inhabit a world is to be inhabited by use'.[28]

A theorist who has painstakingly questioned the narrative of a clear-cut human-technological discreteness is the late philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler built on the thought of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilbert Simondon among others, in order to formulate his particular understanding of *originary technicity:* the human's always already technical embeddedness in the world. Because, according to Stiegler, our 'relation to the world is not given in the least, but rather the result of a whole elaboration [thus] essentially artificial',[29] he effectively draws our attention to something he describes as a paradoxical "dehumanisation" at the very heart of what we colloquially call the human. Invoking a famous Greek myth centred on the figures of Prometheus and Epimetheus – the Titan siblings, gods of foresight and hindsight respectively, responsible for the attribution of qualities to all creatures coming to life – the point of departure for Stiegler's argument is that the human is actually born in a condition of "default", of lack. According to the myth, this lack is the result of a fault: the fault of Epimetheus. The human's natal de-fault-ness is the consequence of Epimetheus' forgetfulness in his distributive task, which leaves the human devoid of natural qualities, and is remedied by his brother Prometheus' theft of fire (here the obvious emblem of technology), stolen from the workshop of Hephaestus and then gifted to the nascent human. This narrative serves as a springboard for Stiegler to address the 'invention *of* the human' and the ambiguity that the genitive creates in this expression, leading him

28 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 26.

29 Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 121-2.

to inquire: '"Who" or "what" does the inventing? "Who" or "what" is invented?'[30] Or, in other words: is the human inventing the tool or being invented by it? While refusing to side with either of the two options, Stiegler asks whether we must not instead 'proceed down a path beyond or below every difference between a *who* and a *what*', thus leaving behind 'oppositional pairs' and the type of dualistic reasoning that technological investigation has 'inherited from metaphysics'.[31]

Throughout his formulation, Stiegler seeks to call into question what he sees as an 'illusion of succession' that is perfectly exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous discussion on the so-called state of nature in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.[32] The latter, Stiegler indeed argues, hinges on a fallacious distinction between what Rousseau sees as two consecutive moments, namely 'those of purity and corruption, of before and after'.[33] Mounting a critique of Hobbes' portrayal of said state of nature as already encountered in Chapter 1 – solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short – the philosophy of Rousseau indeed upholds an opposed view which romanticizes 'the man of pure nature', who is then 'replaced by the man of the fall, of technics and of society'.[34] In other words, Rousseau's human is one whose naturally uncontaminated interiority is forever corrupted, forever tarnished, through contact with the artificial exteriority of technology. By contrast, Stiegler contends by way of anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan that the technicity of the human is given as a relationship whereby 'The interior and the exterior are the same thing, since [the human] (the interior) is essentially defined by the

30 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1994]), 134.

31 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 134, 91, 95.

32 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 142.

33 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 101.

34 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 101.

tool (the exterior)'.[35] In other words, 'interiority is nothing outside of its exteriorization', and vice versa.[36]

Among the significant implications of this account, what particularly interests me here is that Stiegler's thesis prompts us to reconsider use – the alleged knot tying the human and the technological together – not necessarily as a field of individuation, not as an expression of volitional mastery and intentional agency, but rather as one of *corruption* given by and as an ongoing and originary dehumanisation: by an exteriorisation that invalidates any post-facto illusion of uncontaminated interiority. To be clear, what I am referring to here is not the kind of alteration-through-addition to be sought within a project of continuous cyberutopian self-enhancement. It is instead a modality of what Harney and Moten describe as an 'impairment of purity': that is to say, a 'biosocial corruption', a break that ruptures oneness, identity, bounded wholeness and which therefore, somewhat paradoxically, '*constitutes the militant preservation of a general, generative capacity to differ and diffuse*'.[37] Another word for this kind of corruption in the service of differentiation is perhaps perversion: a term that an investment in the mirage of unfettered interiority and sovereignty of the self prevents us from seriously considering as something to embrace. Or, in truth, a perversion that is stamped out of us, that always 'requires straightening, that summons reform' through more norms, more instructions, more correction, more education, more individuation.[38] On this point, Harney and Moten write that 'Perversion violates the principle of the individual by failing to accede to its proper boundaries

35 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 142. It is interesting to note that a similar argument, only from a Marxist perspective, is presented by Søren Mau in Chapter 4 of his book *Mute Compulsion*. Particularly striking is his explicit emphasis on 'the *use* of extra-somatic tools' as '*the* most essential aspect of the corporeal organisation of the human body' in Marxist social ontology, while somewhat deemphasising the purpose-driven forethought guiding that use which is claimed to distinguish human from non-human action. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 95 (emphasis in first quote added).

36 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 152.

37 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 160.

38 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 62.

and comportments' – proper boundaries and comportments, including supposedly technological ones, that all modes of normatively correctional straightening work to instil and institute – and it is therefore 'an already given anti-/ante-individuation'.[39] Once again, just like Stiegler's technological dehumanisation, perversion and corruption are *primary conditions* against individuation: they describe that difference without separability that the "normal", self-contained, individuated body cannot tolerate.

Of course, all of this is a lesson that also comes to us rather vividly not only from Ahmed's queering of use, to be addressed again later in this chapter, but also from critical and crip theories and, most importantly, *experiences* of disability. For example, architect Jos Boys questions the effect that referring only to certain mobility aid devices (such as a wheelchair) but not to others (such as a car, or even hiking boots) as 'assistive technologies' has for interpretations of notions such as ability and disability. [40] This kind of distinction is both produced by and productive of a double individuation, underpinned by ideas of human-technological divide: such a distinction leads to arbitrary assessments of what a normatively productive, self-sufficient individual looks like, while at the same time isolating and individuating those bodies who deviate from said norm based on their need for use of specific forms of technological assistance.

This, then, is the idea I am hoping to embed in a designerly rearrangement of use. The idea that to be in use, as Ahmed puts it, can be something other than standing out – whether in the guise of a person, a human, and agent, a user – as a distinct (even when associated) actant endowed with agency. The idea that attending to the scene of use can point to something not reducible to "who/what did it?", and that being in use can mean instead being utterly enmeshed in and contaminated by an ongoing, corrupting, and generatively perverting technological intra-action.

39 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 62–3.

40 Boys, *Doing Disability Differently*, 16–7. Also see Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

DECOUPLING USE AND FUNCTION

Even when taking into account what just discussed, it is arguably unproblematic to contend that use colloquially speaking names a pragmatic expression of individual intentionality, an action of a subject onto an object, that is aimed at the achievement of an end goal. Or, as Ebbsen has it, 'a process in which some user acts to achieve a purpose in interaction with an artefact'.[41] This way, the use of some thing – an artefact, for instance – is presented as an effort operated *in order to* arrive at or cause a result, therefore indicating an act that derives its significance entirely from something external to it: its purpose, its *telos*, its function. Correspondingly, the artifact (or else) that is engaged with in use remains inevitably confined to the status of instrumental device, the paramount quality of which would appear to be its efficient function-ing: its usefulness in enabling the fulfilment of an action plan. We have already seen how the *source* of such planning – the 'prime actors' identified by different analytic 'attitudes', in keeping with Vardouli's terms introduced earlier on[42] – is a contested issue in design. This is demonstrated for example by the multifaceted creativity of use discussed in Chapter 2, troubling designers' claims of sole authority over the effects of their designing. However, the possibility that there might be something else to use beyond or, more accurately, *beside* instrumental, calculative, plan-driven action is an argument that has not received nearly as much critical attention. It is this 'strong "utilitarian" connotation'[43] with which use has been invested that the present chapter will attempt to interrogate and, eventually, deactivate. If some of the case studies presented in the previous chapter showed that a narrow equating of functionality with *efficiency* and *practical utility* has been compellingly disputed in various experimental design milieus, a second and even more

41 Ebbesen, 'Use in Design Culture', 57.

42 Vardouli, 'Making Use', 139.

43 Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, no. 1 (2014): 67.

resilient pairing can perhaps be called into question now: the coupling of functionality not with usefulness but with use *itself*.

Theodora Vardouli notes that 'there is little consensus about how the concepts of function and use relate to each other',[44] hence the frequent assumption that the two are in fact inextricably co-dependent. This assumption appears to inform even fairly sophisticated articulations. For instance, let us consider sociologist Madeleine Akrich's influential work. Akrich famously posited that the act of designing represents an attempted inscription, whether explicit or not, of complex world-views into the designed "object": an operation producing not merely an artefact, but also something akin to a 'film script' to go with it.[45] In her words, then, designers

> necessarily make hypothesis about the entities that make up the world into which the object is to be inserted. Designers define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways. A large part of the work of innovators is that of *"inscribing"* this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a "script" or a "scenario".[46]

As a consequence, Akrich contends that use ultimately consists in the act of decoding such scripts. Nevertheless, this formulation is not as rigidly deterministic as it might appear at a quick glance. Indeed, Akrich also clarifies that it is by no means guaranteed that a designed script, with its specific assumptions and roles assigned to each "actor", will be taken up in the way it had been predicted by designers. In fact, those users encountering a given object – and, relatedly, a script – might appropriate it in highly unexpected, inventive ways and 'define quite different roles of their own'.[47] Put differ-

44 Vardouli, 'Making Use', 137.

45 Akrich, 'The De-Scription of Technical Objects', 208.

46 Akrich, 'The De-Scription of Technical Objects', 207-8.

47 Akrich, 'The De-Scription of Technical Objects', 208.

ently, Akrich concedes that, although 'technical objects contain and produce a specific geography of responsibilities', this geography 'is open and can be resisted'.[48]

Akrich's perspective is seemingly consistent with the previously explored theme of user inventiveness, but I think that the notion of the script can also allow us to reiterate an important point. Taylor argues that the main contribution offered by Akrich, through her ideas about the encoding and decoding of socio-technical scripts, is to 'provide a methodological tool for the study of design'.[49] However, my sense is that what is at stake in the 'trope of the physical script' – of artefacts containing 'a form of metaphorical instruction manual' – has perhaps less to do with conceptualising 'the relation between production and use' than that between production and function (or functionality), whether intended or inferred.[50] That is to say, I think Akrich presents a compelling way of reflecting on *meaning* more so than on *action*. This might feel like splitting hairs and, to be sure, I do not want to overemphasise the gap between the two categories. Still, at least in the context of this book, I believe that there is much to gain here by being conceptually precise. If, for example, 'The practical affordances of the chair, its physical script, are a speech act, an enunciation which says "sit"',[51] what such a script is communicating implies an aim, a purpose. "Sit", an intention that precedes an action, not "sitt*ing*", the specific unfolding and sustaining of that action in its situated eventfulness: what we *mean to do*, rather than what we *are doing*.

This distinction becomes even clearer if use is understood, as Redström puts it, as 'an on-going achievement, the results of a continuous process of encounters with objects'.[52] Indeed, we do not

48 Akrich, 'The De-Scription of Technical Objects', 207.

49 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 66.

50 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 66–7.

51 Taylor, 'Design Art Furniture', 147.

52 Redström, 'Towards User Design?', 131. For a similar distinction between function and use through the example of sitting, also see Redström, 'RE:Definitions of Use', 413.

necessarily need to actually experience, in physical and temporal terms, the act itself of sitting in order to decipher (or de-script) the physical script of a chair, as in what the chair is (meant to be) for.[53] Importantly, this is regardless of whether or not we correctly comprehend the "proper" meaning of the chair as a normative exhortation to act in such and such a way in order to sit or, alternatively, we assign to it a completely different import. To be clear, my point here is not that the process of interpretation of an object described by Akrich in terms of the decoding of a script is unimportant. Nor do I want to argue that such a script, together with the broader socio-cultural ecology in which the script is embedded, cannot in fact suggest an act. Rather, what I am trying to say is that Akrich's formulation still casts use as a materially mediated transaction of sorts whereby intention precedes action, function precedes use, making all the more apparent the urgency of cutting the conceptual knot tying together a *plan* of action (function) and the *scene* of action *itself* (use).[54] By contrast, I want to take very seriously Felski's invita-

53 In a way, we can see a similar distinction at work in the rhetorical use that much CSD is predicated on. Indeed, it is my impression that critiques of functionalism revolving around a rejection of usefulness have often failed to get to the bottom of the question of use itself and, as a result, have tended to throw away the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, by completely abdicating the sphere of corporeal use.

54 This is also why I do not find particularly helpful for the present exploration the kind of classification put forward by cognitivist approaches such as that of philosophers of technology Pieter Vermaas and Wybo Houkes. Vermaas and Houkes have sought to distinguish design-led functionality from users' intentionality: the former, they contend, represents the 'standard view' and descriptive appreciation of what a given artefact had been designed for; the latter, which they term 'use plans', instead points to the 'structured sequences of considered actions, rather than in terms of (only) functions', that is devised by the user. It is not entirely clear to me what is supposed to set apart a "use plan" from function, given that the latter can very well be determined by users' purposefulness rather than exclusively by designers' expectations. Pieter E. Vermaas and Wybo Houkes, 'Use Plans and Artefact Functions: An Intentionalist Approach to Artefacts and Their Use', in *Doing Things with Things: The Design and Use of Everyday Objects*, ed. Ole Dreier and Alan Costall (Oxon: Routledge, 2016 [2006]), 29. Also see Wybo Houkes, and Pieter E. Vermaas, *Technical Functions: On the Use and Design of Artefacts* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

tion to recognise that '"Use" is not always strategic or purposeful, manipulative or grasping; it does not have to involve the sway of instrumental rationality'.[55]

Let me underscore a crucial point. As already noted in the Introduction, Ahmed cogently warned us that rejecting function or, more precisely, 'the loosening of the relation between form and function', can become easily folded into elitist deprecations of the merely "useful".[56] But, once again, what I am wrestling towards here is not a championing of uselessness over usefulness. The point I am trying to make here is not so much ethical as methodological: it is imperative that we are fully alert to the fact that, as Ahmed puts it, 'The *effect* of use is not always the *point* of use', so treating the two as if they were the same thing is, I think, bound to lead us astray.[57] What I am suggesting, then, is that so long as we are unable to distinguish between the scene of use itself, its possible *effects* (useful or useless as they might be), and attempts at directing use through plans and protocols of action, we will remain unable to consider the potential peculiarity of use outside of the mechanics of the individual, intentional agent.

BEYOND TELEOLOGY

It is through the work of Agamben that, I think, we can begin to develop a more radical appreciation of use. Indeed, particularly when looking beyond his more widely renown writings on the notions of *bare life* and *state of exception* (as well as his questionable takes on the Covid-19 pandemic), use and its uncomfortable relation to other concepts – such as function, consumption, productivity, rule, property – have become increasingly central to Agamben's thought. I will therefore examine some of the key aspects of the his attempted 'elaboration of a theory of use – of which', he claims,

55 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 8.

56 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 133.

57 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 52 (emphasis added).

'Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles'.[58] This effort appears somewhat scattered across his writings and, although clearly indebted to Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, it is perhaps best read as a continuation of Michel Foucault's famous work on the 'care of the self'.[59] Agamben appears quite explicit on this point, as he contends that such a thing as the care expressed by the Foucauldian subject can become possible only insofar as that subject is first engaged in 'a series of relations of use'.[60] In other words, as we shall see, for Agamben procedural primacy should be granted to 'the relations of use over care-of-oneself'.[61]

In *The Use of Bodies*, the ninth and final instalment of his twenty-year long Homo Sacer project, Agamben directly addresses the difficulty of decoupling use and function. Taking up Aristotle's distinction between 'productive instruments and instruments of use (which produce nothing except their use)', [62] Agamben acknowledges that

> We are so accustomed to thinking of use and instrumentality as a function of an external goal that it is not easy for us to understand a dimension of use entirely independent of an end.[63]

If we are to grasp a different meaning of use, he continues, we must therefore begin by separating it 'from the sphere of *poiesis*

58 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013 [2011]) xiii. The focus and remit of Agamben's investigation implied in this claim arguably epitomise what Ahmed described as the consequential 'narrowness of Agamben's archive' – something that this book has tried to take seriously. Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 232 n7.

59 E.g., Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016 [2013]).

60 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 33.

61 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 33.

62 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 12. It is worth point out that the Aristotelian analysis that Agamben is here examining was preoccupied with defining use in relation to the slave's body.

63 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 12.

and production, in order to restore it to the sphere ... of praxis'.[64] In many ways following in Hannah Arendt's footsteps,[65] Agamben's recourse to Aristotle provides yet another interesting insight only a few pages later, as he probes even further this distinction between *poiesis* and praxis by examining the relationship between act and will. Agamben observes that, according to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *poiesis* is defined by the presence of an external end (or *telos*). Much like the colloquial understanding of use discussed earlier, this is a mode of acting that is thus entirely bound to the production of a result other than its own unfolding. As Agamben explains elsewhere, poietic activity 'necessarily has both its end and its limit outside itself', in the sense that the will must extend or be projected – it must will, so to speak – beyond the action itself in order to achieve the production of something other than that action.[66] By contrast, Agamben argues that praxis is an "unproductive" mode of acting that 'is in itself the end'.[67] And because 'central to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act', here the limit of the will remains internal to the act: the will wills nothing other than the action itself.[68] What Agamben ultimately proposes by way of this distinction is that use, being perhaps a peculiar form of praxis rather than *poiesis*, belongs not to the sphere of production but to that of 'experience', in the sense of the happening of something or the partaking in an event.[69]

Shifting his attention to Epicurean philosophy, Agamben then finds in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* an analogous conceptualization of use as 'completely emancipated from every relation to a

64 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 12.

65 See: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]).

66 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1994]), 73.

67 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 21.

68 Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 68.

69 Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 74.

predetermined end': a relation, that is to say, 'beyond every teleology'.[70] Here, through a reflection on the use that living beings make of their body parts, it is suggested that the function of something – a limb, in Lucretius' case – is *created* through use, rather than being the pre-existing principle guiding it. Understood in this way, use precedes the function of whatever one "enters" into a relation with, and indeed invents this function throughout the unfolding of that very relation. Hence inverting Akrich's formulation, Lucretius argues that 'The origin of the tongue was far anterior to speech. The ears were created long before a sound was heard'.[71] Consequently, a function can be intended as an elusive yet distinct and secondary stage emerging within a process of use, perhaps as an effect of it. Mazé comes much to the same conclusion when she writes that 'we might understand rules, plans and procedures to be a consequence – not just a cause – of the fact that people choose to follow and thus sustain them'.[72]

What Agamben begins to offer through his analysis is the possibility to isolate use and approach it as radically autonomous from whatever function *might* eventually arise through (or be reproduced by) it. That is to say: the emergence of function could be resolutely neutralised or, perhaps, indefinitely deferred through a mode of use that is ceaselessly and creatively reinvented, a use that is ever-unfolding and spontaneously improvisational. Such a perspective is to some extent akin to what Vardouli describes as 'use-centric': an attitude whereby use is intended as 'an open-ended and temporally unfolding process that can be theorized and described independently from intentions and actions in the context of design'.[73]

70 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 51.

71 Lucretius cited in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 51.

72 Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 114.

73 Vardouli, 'Making Use', 140.

Part II: Use as How

COORDINATE 1 // PROFANATION

The task of dissociating use from functionality, suspending the teleological economy in which use is otherwise embroiled, is actually not as inconceivable as it might at first appear. In fact, a mode of acting that is utterly disinterested and improvisational is routinely found in a rather mundane domain: the everyday sphere of *play*.

Two important texts should be acknowledged here, albeit without thoroughly dissecting them, both of which have offered major contributions to the study of play: Johan Huizinga's 1938 book *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois' direct response to it in his 1958 work *Man, Play and Games*. In his landmark study, Huizinga tried to show that culture emerges as play or, in his words, that 'in its earliest phases [it] has the play-character'.[74] Which begs the question: what does he mean by "play-character"? Huizinga proposed a number of key attributes: play, he claimed, is voluntary in nature[75] and disinterested,[76] it proceeds 'according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner',[77] but most important of all, it is fundamentally separate in time and space from everyday life.[78] In Huizinga's words, play is thus 'an intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives'.[79] While broadly subscribing to Huizinga's definition, Caillois' analysis offers some additional considerations. First, he contends that the formulation proposed by Huizinga ignores those activities not bound to rules such as pretend play.[80] Caillois writes:

74 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980 [1938]) 46.

75 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 28.

76 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

77 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

78 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

79 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

80 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [1958]) 8.

> No fixed or rigid rules exist for playing ... games, in general, which presuppose free improvisation, and the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else.[81]

We will want to mark this "as if" locution, to which I will return at the end of the book. Second, Caillois claims that play is an inherently "wasteful" activity, without however attaching to the term a negative connotation.[82] Indeed, what he means is that, even in cases such as gambling, whereby property or money is exchanged, in play nothing is being *produced:* much like with Agamben's praxis discussed above, play is essentially 'unproductive'.[83] Third, Caillois proposes that all kinds of play fall onto 'a continuum between two opposite poles' or styles of play: *paidia* and *ludus*.[84] The former indicates those exuberant activities characterised by 'free improvisation'.[85] The latter names instead highly skilful and disciplined activities, presenting 'a growing tendency to bind [play] with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions'.[86]

One aspect that Huizinga fails to notice, and which Caillois registers but ultimately does not convincingly thematise, is an important difference between play and games. This is a delicate and crucial distinction over which not only Huizinga and Caillois but Agamben's analysis too seems to gloss, except perhaps for a brief passage, likely due to a linguistic hurdle more so than to a conceptual blind spot.[87] Interestingly, the essential contrast between games and play has

81 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 8.

82 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 5-6.

83 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 10.

84 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

85 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

86 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

87 See: Giorgio Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2007 [2005]), 75-6. The Italian language happens to flatten any differences between the two terms by rendering both as *gioco* (noun) and *giocare* (verb), which has consequently resulted in the English translation of Agamben's text adopting both terms interchangeably.

instead been accurately captured by some design theorists. Notably, Ben Matthews, Marcelle Stienstra, and Tom Djajadiningrat have argued that while games are structured pursuits, grounded in pre-existing sets of rules and leading to the achievement of identifiable objectives, play 'can be the suspension of goal-directed activity'.[88] In other words, they then conclude, 'Play can be for play's sake'.[89] Rules and objectives – whether received, explicitly scripted,[90] or autonomously invented – precede and lead games just as function precedes and leads an intentional apprehension of use. Conversely, in play, whatever "rule" might emerge is ceaselessly generated through, hence entirely immanent to, use. Rules in play are supple and constantly reassessed. To explain this through an example: just as kicking a ball does not alone define "football", engaging with a chair does not alone lead to the function "sitting."

This making and breaking of rules – or, better still, this continuous rule making-and-unmaking – is the grammar of play; it is the grammar of playful use. An improvisational grammar that is therefore not so much functional as, perhaps, *jurisgenerative*, as Moten might say.[91] A grammar not *submitting* to guiding rules but rather *generating* (hence prior to and exceeding) them: rules informally formed and deformed, made on the fly only to be constantly reformulated, unmade, outwitted.

But let me return to Agamben. Play, he argues, 'is a relationship with objects and human behavior' which should be discussed in

88 Ben Matthews, Marcelle Stienstra, and Tom Djajadiningrat, 'Emergent Interaction: Creating Spaces for Play', *Design Issues* 24, no. 3 (2008): 62. Anticipating a discussion of the Situationist International later in the chapter, we should mention that the same distinction had being made by British situationist Ralph Rumney too. See: McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2015) 63.

89 Matthews et al., 'Emergent Interaction', 62.

90 Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 141.

91 Fred Moten, 'Jurisgenerative Grammar (For Alto)', in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*. Vol. 1, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 128–42.

connection with the religious sphere and, particularly, with the act of profanation.[92] Indeed, in the essay *In Praise of Profanation*, he remarks that 'There seems to be a peculiar relationship between "using" and "profaning" that we must clarify'.[93] It should be acknowledged that the close association between divinatory rituals and play had already been examined by Huizinga. However, while the latter identified a radical removal from the sphere of everyday activity as the defining feature sacred rites and play purportedly have in common,[94] we shall see that Agamben's elaboration appears to point in the opposite direction.

Agamben is initially preoccupied with how the passage from profane to sacred rests on the apparatus of *sacrifice*, whereby a "thing" – the object of the sacrifice – is appropriately cut off and transposed from the sphere of human affairs to that of the divine. Interestingly, he then goes on to note, by way of linguist Émile Benveniste, that this sacrificial caesura itself revolves around a particular conjunction: the 'conjunction of the myth that tells the story and the rite that reproduces and stages it', which is to say a synergy between proper meaning and the act itself.[95] Conversely, the opposite motion, from sacred to profane, constitutes an act of profanation which can be caused by a 'an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse)' of what is being handled during a rite.[96] According to Agamben, the name of this inappropriate use, which profanatory procedures are predicated on, is play: a playful use that instead of appropriately upholding the connection between ritual and myth 'breaks this unity' by preserving only one of the two terms.[97] Indeed, Agamben points out that many forms of physical play originated as re-enactments of sacred rites that had

92 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007 [1978]) 81.

93 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 74.

94 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 19-27.

95 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75.

96 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75.

97 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75.

been emptied of their traditional meaning. Now, if we were to apply this same formulation to the mode of use being outlined here, we could arguably draw a parallel between the terms "myth" and "ritual" and two counterparts: respectively, "function" (or script) and "use itself". This way, we could reinterpret as a mode of playful profanation the rite of physically using, say, a bench in a manner that is however decoupled from its proper functional significance – its myth – of sitting.

Agamben holds that this sharp separation(-by-conjunction) between the spheres of the sacred and that of the profane unambiguously lies at the heart of all major religions, and indeed represents their very condition of possibility. This observation is then followed up by the critical assertion that 'It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine [...] that stand in opposition to religion, but "negligence"'.[98] Importantly, negligence must be intended here not as simple neglect or wholesale withdrawal but, rather, as 'a new dimension of use'[99] underpinned by 'a behaviour that is free and "distracted" (that is to say, released from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use'.[100] Free, then, not in the sense of forgoing or abolishing rites altogether, but because *inattentive* towards the correct protocols and formal procedures regulating them – first among these, as mentioned, the unity of rite itself and meaning underpinning sacrificial acts. Indeed, Agamben continues, 'To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation [between divine and Earthly spheres] or, rather, puts it to a particular use'.[101] Indeed, as he emphasises over and over again, 'the example of play clearly shows' that the operation of profanation – of profanatory use – does

98 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75.

99 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 76.

100 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75. Agamben shows that the term *religio* comes not from *religare* (to unite) but from *relegere* (reread), which 'indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relations with the gods'. Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 74-5.

101 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 75.

not merely involve the eradication of all that concerns the sacred as a means to then restore or 'regain an uncontaminated use that lies either beyond or before' the effects of sacrificial separation.[102] Quite the opposite. Political philosopher German Primera suggests that 'to use', for Agamben, ultimately means 'to liberate an object, to suspend its economy, to render it inoperative'.[103] It means to play with artefacts *and* the rules that seek to govern them – their economy – 'just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good', as we read in a famous passage in Agamben's *State of Exception*.[104]

In this respect, there are a few quite striking analogies to be detected between this apprehension of playful use as a form of profanation and some of the ludic experiments devised and theorised by mid-twentieth century French avant-garde and self-styled revolutionary group Situationist International (SI), which I would like to touch on at least in passing. This proximity is not particularly surprising, given that Agamben not only engaged in personal correspondence with the SI's undisputed central figure, Guy Debord, but has also written on the latter in more than one occasion. And it is indeed Debord who, like Agamben after him and contrarily to what proposed by both Huizinga and Caillois, insisted that the playfulness at the heart of what the SI famously called "constructed situations"[105] had to be 'extended to *all* known forms of human relationships', rather than segregated into a special and distinct domain,

102 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 85.

103 German Eduardo Primera, *The Political Ontology of Giorgio Agamben: Signatures of Life and Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 133.

104 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [2003]) 64.

105 Constructed situations essentially involved techniques for experimental comportment. As Debord scholar Tom Bunyard notes, 'Constructed situations [...] were deliberately designed so as to include chance elements', which 'were held to render lived experience potentially ludic'. This way, he continues, 'Life, as realised art, would become akin to play'. Tom Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 70.

so as to gradually encompass the totality of social life.[106] Even more remarkable is the overlap between Agamben's discussion of playfulness and the sacred sphere and a reflection on the same themes formulated by another prominent SI member: Raoul Vaneigem. In his 1967 classic *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem unambiguously spelled out the connection between play, rules, and sacred rites in terms that very much align with the negligent jurisgenerativity articulated above. He writes:

> Once the idea of sacrifice appears the game becomes sacrosanct and its rules become rites. In true play, the rules encompass ways of getting round the rules, of playing with them. In the realm of the sacred, by contrast, rituals are not to be toyed with, they can only be broken, transgressed. [...] Only play deconsecrates – opening the door to boundless freedom.[107]

Immediately after this remark, Vaneigem addresses the importance of play for the key situationist tactic known as *détournement*. 'Play', he notes, 'is the principle of *détournement*, the freedom to repurpose, to change the meaning of everything that serves Power'.[108] Which is to say that, much like Agamben's profanation, *détournement* essentially entails the opening of existing practices of use to deconsecrating, playful improvisation by – in Debord's terms – 'refusing to acknowledge any inherent value they might claim to have'.[109]

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106 Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency' (1957), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. and trans. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 46 (my emphasis).

107 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012 [1967]) 232. Here too "game" and "play" are used interchangeably, given the French language rendition of both as *"jeu"*.

108 Vaneigem, *Revolution*, 232.

109 Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action' (1957), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb, Revised and expanded ed. (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 36.

We should begin to see, then, that in practices of profanatory play the ritualistic behaviours 'are not effaced': perhaps through the substitution of the object around which the rite revolves, they are instead 'deactivated and thus opened to a new, possible use'.[110] Yet, this admittedly cryptic language still begs the question, which Agamben eventually asks: 'But what sort of use?'[111] It is at this point that we are offered some helpful conceptual handles, as Agamben further unpacks the specifics of profanatory play. In another passage from the same essay, which is worth quoting at length here, we learn that this "new" mode of use

> consists in freeing a behaviour from its genetic *inscription* within a given sphere [...] The freed behaviour still reproduces and mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use. [...] The activity that results from this thus becomes a *pure means*, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as *a means without an end*. The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.[112]

COORDINATE 2 // GESTURE

A number of important considerations could now be formulated, based on the quote above. The first one concerns the "genetic inscription" from which use is freed when articulated as improper, profanatory play – bringing us back once again onto Akrich's semantic terrain. Impropriety in use, for Agamben, does not describe that

110 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 85.

111 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 85.

112 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 85-6 (emphasis added).

act which reverses or alters the propriety of a pregiven script, of a genetically (i.e., designerly) inscripted protocol of action, simply by replacing it with a different yet equally proper one. In other words, this is not a merely *creative* act (more on this point later on). Rather, improper or profane is that act of use which makes the very concept of script itself lose any meaning as such. It is a material practice that is radically opened to situational emergence through its drastic and deliberate disconnection from the logic of intentionality and the "obligatory" horizon of ends, of functionality. Interestingly, a similar perspective can be found in Ahmed's work: as she writes that 'Use does *not* necessarily correspond to an intended function', Ahmed goes on to propose that 'This *not* is an opening'.[113] Which means that this opening given by, as, and through playful profanation is not so much an opening *to* another (more or equally) appropriate use to be discovered, as an opening *of* use itself.

This opening of use leads us to a second consideration. Agamben claims that, because 'play as an organ of profanation is in decline everywhere', well beyond the religious sphere alone, through a secularization of liturgies and theological concepts, this usological profanation has become of utmost significance.[114] Indeed, he asserts that 'To return to play its purely profane vocation is a political task'.[115] Why? Because it is where the profanatory force of use gets obliterated and made impossible that we find today the twofold domination of vacuous commodity consumption – according to Agamben's proto-Marxian analysis, the contemporary form of separation par excellence – and of detached 'spectacular exhibition' through a 'museification of the world'.[116] Which is to say: we find the increasingly 'unprofanable' apparatus of power governing our acting that Agamben, here adopting a distinctly Benjaminian tone, calls the 'capitalist religion'.[117] Resisting

113 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 24.

114 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 76.

115 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 77.

116 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 82-3.

117 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 82.

this progressive preclusion of profanation and developing new modes of playful use, Agamben finally concludes, represents 'the political task of the coming generation'.[118]

Now, if the "religion" primarily governing a narrow relationship to the sphere of use is indeed utility, as I proposed earlier on, and if the sacredness of the latter is given by the instrumental conjunction between a ritual of use and its ascribed meaning (functionality, regardless of authorship), perhaps what Agamben shows us is that the challenge we are presented with is not one calling for the invention of altogether new rituals, new scripts, or new functions. Rather, it is one calling for the profanation of existing practices of use and the logics guiding them. What is at stake is not something entirely *other* than, say, perching on a chair or kicking a ball, but a profane approach to these same acts. In other words, what is needed is the interruption or deactivation of 'the reasons and purposes that define [what is done]' through a dance-like practice, as Agamben writes elsewhere, that mimics rituals while *at the same time* affording 'the liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements'.[119]

Third consideration: adopting such a profanatory approach to use further complicates the Aristotelian distinction addressed earlier on between means-to-end productivity – *poiesis* – and acting as end-in-itself – praxis. What emerges through the profanatory operation outlined here, as Agamben contends, is indeed a "pure means" – another Benjaminian term – or a "means without end". Let me pause and reflect on this significant move. In an essay of the same name, *Means without End*, Agamben turns to the writings of Roman scholar Varro to discover what appears to be neither *poiesis* nor praxis but, in fact, 'a third type of action alongside the other two'.[120] This is the terrain of *gesture*: a domain that 'breaks with the

118 Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 92. For a similar argument on play and consumerism more directly concerned with design, also see Taylor, *Moving Objects*, 142.

119 Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 69-70.

120 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Cesarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1996]), 57.

false alternative between ends and means'.[121] And it is indeed this sphere, Agamben continues, that could represent 'the other side of the commodity' by being 'neither use value nor exchange value', thus allowing us to profane the capitalist religion of commodity consumption.[122] Gesture, we might say, is what is found once use has been successfully profaned; once it has been stripped of its instrumentally proper, functionally poietic residue, and is returned to us as the open, radically unproductive impropriety of play.

A gestural practice of use can therefore be intended as an undirected, perhaps even aimless process of exploration whereby we can get lost in what Agamben calls a 'delight internal to the act'.[123] Indeed, the cardinal peculiarity of gesture 'is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported'.[124] That is to say: something is turned into, and sustained as, pure processuality, rather than being realised and represented by the attainment of particular results – hence arguably setting Agamben's use apart from the productive character of what Vardouli terms 'making use'.[125] To use, in this gestic sense, is to dwell in a potentiality that is never extinguished, that never passes into the actuality implied by the notions of function or script: gestural use is an ongoing display of 'impotentiality', as Agamben names the experience of a potentiality that suspends and thus 'survives actuality'.[126] Moreover, this processual unproductivity of use – reminiscent of Caillois' take on the wastefulness of play – is what Agamben refers to as *inoperativity*. The latter is a frequently misunderstood term, first introduced in the work of French theorists such as Alexandre Kojève, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Agamben further

121 Agamben, *Means without End,* 57.

122 Agamben, *Means without End,* 80.

123 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 51.

124 Agamben, *Means without End,* 57.

125 Vardouli, 'Making Use', 150.

126 Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183-4.

developed the concept of inoperativity to indicate not mere inactivity or even passivity but a generalised resistance to the productivist logic dictating that all potential leads to an *opera:* a completed result, legible as the outcome or realisation of a concluded process. Or, as Agamben himself summarises elsewhere: 'inoperativity does not mean inertia, but *katargesis* – that is to say, an operation whereby the how completely substitutes the what'.[127] This something that according to Agamben is endured and supported in gesture, then, is nothing other than the "activity" itself, in its suspended, ever-unfolding openness.

If we have already seen a similar attention to the ongoingness of use in Redström's formulation – a perspective somewhat at odds with inoperativity due to its recalcitrant insistence on the temporalities of achievement – it is worth mentioning the proximity between this gestural suspension and the type of lingering in use that Ahmed describes under the rubric of *queer use*. Queer use, as well as queer*ing* use, for Ahmed, is a mode of straying from the normative frameworks of use, which is also to say from the "usual" as norm, and perverting the straight paths that guide our practices so as to make room not for new orthodoxies but for yet more straying, for yet more variation, for yet more perversion. Queer use, Ahmed insists, is to 'not get to the point'. [128] If reconfigured as gestural experiments in playful profanation, rather than as *poiesis* or praxis, use would thus unfold as an open exercise in preserving and exhibiting a certain modus operandi: a certain how – a *queer how*, perhaps – that does not need to arrive anywhere specific nor to produce specific effects. Which is not to say that no effects *whatsoever* ensue a gestural practice of use. Rather, the point is to avoid any operational confusion between effects and functionality, recalling

127 Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001 [1990]), 93 (my translation). This excerpt is included only in a short postscript [*postilla*], titled *Tiqqun de la noche*, to the 2001 Italian edition of *The Coming Community*. For more specific reflections on the concept of inoperativity, see Giovanni Marmont and German E. Primera, 'The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Inoperativity', *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 3 (2020).

128 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 206.

once again that, in Ahmed's words, 'The effect of use is not always the point of use'.[129] If we peer beneath the surface of unconditionally productivist perspectives, inoperative practices of use might be turned instead into something we could describe, with philosopher Reiner Schürmann, as 'a groundless play without why'.[130]

Once again, one possible prototype for the exploratory activity described here could perhaps be found in situationist practice, and more specifically in the so-called *dérive*. A *dérive*, French for "drift", is a 'technique of locomotion without a goal'.[131] Already introduced by a short-lived SI precursor known as *Letterist International* (1952-1957) and inspired by previous Dadaist and Surrealists flâneurism, the tactic has been the object of extensive scholarly critique and is still performed in various forms to this day by more or less obscure psychogeography societies.[132] Tom Bunyard helpfully summarises these roaming experiments as practices of '"drifting" through the city [...] following no prior plan other than the whims and desires provoked by the local ambiences'.[133] Those engaging in *dérives* therefore 'drop [...] their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attraction of the terrain and the encounters they find there'.[134] Importantly, however, they often do so through the deliberate creation of what we might describe as rules for getting lost – such as patterns to follow, randomised routes to

129 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 52.

130 Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987 [1982]) 243.

131 Debord cited in Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1992]) 58.

132 For an overview of the state of the *dérive* in contemporary theory and practice, see for example Phil Smith, 'The contemporary dérive: a partial review of issues concerning the contemporary practice of psychogeography', *Cultural Geographies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 103-22.

133 Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle*, 88.

134 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive' (1958), in *Situationist International Anthology*, Revised and expanded ed., ed. and trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62.

take and unconventional modes of walking, specific details to pay attention to, etc. – attempting to neutralise the scripts imposed on city dwellers by urban planners not to offer a better alternative for getting somewhere, nor a better destination, but to look beyond the 'utilitarian imperatives' of purposeful A-to-B locomotion.[135] Situationist *dérives* ultimately intended to afford a condition of 'permanent play' [*jeu permanent*], as we read on a 1958 poster,[136] through an incessant 'succession of new fields of chance'.[137] This way, the SI's drifts sought to 'accommodate a certain degree of "letting go"',[138] in Simon Sadler's words, within what Debord defined as a 'practice of passionate uprooting',[139] therefore trying to somehow reconcile the tension between tactical planning and openness to the transitory nature of constructed situations (I will return to this tension in Chapter 5). The use that *dérives* are predicated on, I would argue, is a profanatory, gestural mode of playing *with*, more so than *through*, the city. And this is the peculiar *how* of use Agamben can point us towards.

Part III: Use as With

COORDINATE 3 // AFFECTABILITY

In a study addressing Agamben's elaboration of gesture, performance theorist Lucia Ruprecht underscores its ethical slant to contend that this mode of acting could be understood 'as an opening of the body beyond itself, as something that is often, or perhaps

135 Letterist International, 'Architecture and Play' (1955), in *The Situationists and The City*, ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 47. Debord was the editor of the issue (#20) of the letterist information bulletin *Potlatch* that featured this short text.

136 Tom McDonough, *The Situationists and The City* (London: Verso, 2009), 13.

137 Tom Bunyard, 'A Genealogy and Critique of Guy Debord's Theory of Spectacle', PhD Thesis (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2011), 74.

138 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) 78.

139 Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations', 2002, 46.

even necessarily, relational'.[140] And indeed, as I will try to show in the next few sections, Agamben appears committed to rethinking use not only in terms of its unproductive processuality, in terms of a distinctive "how", but also as a fundamentally relational terrain, as a "with", even though such a commitment is not always explicit or brought to the fore (nor, it must be said, taken to the same anti-/ante-individuation conclusions pursued here). Of course, that use is an inherently social sphere is nothing unheard of. In fact, it has already been noted in previous chapters that much has been written in design research (and beyond) about the dialogical, rhetorical, or networked nature of person-artefact interactions. Still, Agamben's perspective arguably diverges from what much design literature tends to emphasise and insist on: seeing use as 'discrete acts of perception and interpretation',[141] as non-verbal exchanges of information, as technologically mediated 'communicative and linguistic meaning-negotiation',[142] as potential instances of agency redistribution, and so on. Let me inspect the characteristic withness of Agamben's use.

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben dedicates an entire chapter to the etymology of the Greek verb *chresthai:* a term which, he argues, is discussed but 'almost never thematized as such' in Foucault's investigation on the care of the self.[143] Agamben notes that this verb is ordinarily rendered as 'to use', and that it always points to a generic 'relationship with something'.[144] However, turning to the work of famed linguists George Redard and Émile Benveniste, Agamben explains that the instrumental connotations colouring contemporary translations enormously oversimplify the original complexity of *chresthai*, ultimately 'emrg[ing] as inadequate to grasp the meaning

140 Lucia Ruprecht, 'Introduction: Towards an Ethics of Gesture', *Performance Philosophy* 3, no.1 (2017): 4.

141 Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 111.

142 Ebbesen, 'Use in Design Culture', 55.

143 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 33.

144 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 25.

of the Greek verb'.[145] How so? Agamben goes on to highlight that the principal feature of *chresthai* – which has been notably scrubbed off in more casual understandings of use – is that, in it, the seemingly impenetrable semantic partition dividing active and passive voices collapses. That is to say, *chresthai* belongs to a class of verbs expressed in what grammarians call middle voice, or 'middle diathesis': verbs which are 'neither active nor passive' or, rather, that are simultaneously *both* active *and* passive.[146] Middle-voice verbs are far from an obscure or insignificant linguistic oddity, as Tim Ingold observes while examining the same study by Benveniste. In fact, Ingold points out that the active/passive dichotomy found today in most Indo-European languages is 'neither ancient nor universal'.[147] Rather, he goes on to note in regard to this opposition that not only 'Plenty of non-Indo-European languages do not have it', but also that 'even within the Indo-European fold it has emerged historically from a decomposition of ... the "middle voice"'.[148] This leads Ingold to argue that it is precisely through this peculiar dissolution that we have inherited the articulation of agency as the property of a doer separated from its deed. Rethinking use as a mode of acting in the middle voice presents a number of significant implications.

A first major aspect concerns the "place" of the subject of the act with respect to the process of use and the "motion", so to speak, of its effects. The process taking place in the active and passive voices is one either starting or ending with a subject, respectively: this subject is thus either one effecting or affected by the unfolding of the action. That is to say, either acting *or* acted upon. In other words, active and passive voices denote two antithetical

145 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 27.

146 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 27. It is perhaps worth pointing out that political theorist Jane Bennett has recently reflected in fairly similar terms on the affective possibilities of 'middle-voiced' or 'process-oriented verbs', while still retaining a commitment to the notion of agency – see: Jane Bennett, *Influx & Efflux: Writing up with Walt Whitman* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020), 112-14.

147 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 17.

148 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 17.

linear motions for the action at stake: in the former, the action moves outward, emanating from within an effecting "agent", the originator of that action; in the latter, we see an opposite inward motion, as the action springing from outwith reaches the sphere of an affected "patient",[149] the receiver of that action. Note how, in both cases, the agent/patient is external to, hence distinct from, the action. By contrast, in middle-voiced verbs both this linear directionality and locus of the action are muddled and so is, consequently, the relation that the subject has with that action. Indeed, Benveniste's investigation proposes that the subject of verbs in the middle voice, because 'internal to the process', because amidst its unfolding, is both effecting *and* affected by the action at once.[150] Or, perhaps more precisely still, the subject of *chresthai* 'effects *in being affected*': it is itself altered *by* the effect of its partaking in the action.[151]

Now, when Agamben further specifies that this subject described by Benveniste essentially 'achieves something which is being achieved in [the subject itself]', this assertion could quickly lead us astray.[152] We should not rush to the conclusion that 'the singular threshold that the middle voice establishes' necessarily plunges this same subject of use into a state of utterly solipsistic *reflexivity*.[153] The reason for this is not a crudely utilitarian triumph: the acknowledgement that such an "achievement", in use, must always already imply some sort of interaction with an instrument, with an object of use, whatever this might be (a tool or, returning to Lucretius, even the subject's own limb), upon which the subject imposes its will. In fact, Agamben explains that 'to enter into a

149 *'Paziente'* [patient] is the Italian term used by Agamben to name the subject of a passive verb: a subject who, in his *'passione'* [passion], is affected and acted upon. See: Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014) 55.

150 Benveniste cited in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 27.

151 Benveniste cited in Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 68 (emphasis added). Impossible not to be reminded here of science-fiction writer Octavia Butler's famous quote 'All that you change, changes you'. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (London: Headline Publishing, 2014 [1993]).

152 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 27.

153 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 28.

relation of use with something, *I must be affected by it'*. [154] In other words, in a middle-voiced use affection is the very condition of possibility for the effecting of an action to take place. This way, Agamben concludes in an unmistakeably Spinozan-Deleuzian fashion, use can be defined as *'the affection that a body receives inasmuch as it is in relation with another body'*.[155]

So far so good, hopefully. Yet, what is most remarkable in this reconfiguration of use as an expression of *affectivity* is the particular type of relationship undergirding it. As Agamben puts it:

> a relation so close between subject and object that not only is the subject intimately modified, but the boundaries between the two terms of the relationship even seem indeterminated.[156]

This indeterminacy in and of use as *chresthai*, then, is given as a *'relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence'* wherein 'Human being and world' are tangled up to such an extent that, Agamben concludes, 'in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake'.[157] Indeed, as he further contends, this reciprocal immanence at work in *chresthai* brings about 'a radical transformation of the ontology (an ontology in the middle voice)

154 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 30 (emphasis added).

155 Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 69 (emphasis in original). The concept of "affect" was famously introduced by Spinoza and then taken up by Deleuze, essentially indicating a body's capacity to affect and be affected, or, as affect theorists Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg frame it, 'the capacities to act and be acted upon', with the two intended as *inseparable instances of the same process*. Seigworth and Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', 1. Also see: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. E. M. Curley (London: Penguin, 1996 [1677]); Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2001 [1988]); as well as Brian Massumi's influential definition of "affect/affection", differentiating between the latter and the personal internality of "emotions", in his *Notes on the Translation* in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1987]) xv.

156 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 26.

157 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 30.

of the concept of "subject" itself'.[158] The boundaries containing and reproducing binary oppositions between user and used, person and thing, doer and deed, and above all subject and object, are here therefore beginning to feel rather shaky, as these ontological categories are getting enveloped in a web of mutual co-implication and complication. When he writes that what is at stake in use is 'not a subject that uses an object, but a subject that constitutes itself *only through the using*, the being in relation with an other', Agamben therefore points to an action that appears to be necessarily pre-subjective.[159] Indeed, in this case any idea of subject and object is but a 'post-facto reflection', to say it in Brian Massumi's words, for use 'is reducible to neither taken separately'.[160] This "subject" as a user-that-acts is but a partial, singular post-rationalisation of (and untangling from) a prior, more complex entanglement. Therefore, in keeping with Massumi's perspective, use as an unfolding event *might* 'only retrospectively be "owned", or owed up to'.[161] It is arguably in this sense that we must understand Agamben's assertion that use appears to be 'a practice that cannot be assigned a subject'.[162]

This way, an ontology of use in the middle voice, being entirely constructed upon something of an originary affective entanglement, is one revolving around what circulates *amongst* putatively separate entities rather than what happens in or to individual agents and patients. Not only, then, is Agamben's articulation of use pointing towards an ontology of the how – what he calls a 'modal ontology'[163] – but it is also and categorically an ontology of the with: a social ontology, so to speak. this convergence in use of how and with that Agamben's study brings to light is aptly synthesised in a passage by Redard, which Agamben reports:

158 Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 69.

159 Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 69 (emphasis added).

160 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 94.

161 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 94.

162 Jason Smith, '"I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am...": An interview with Giorgio Agamben', *Rethinking Marxism* 16, no.2 (2004): 118.

163 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 175.

> Of course, *chraomai* means: I use, I utilize (an instrument, a tool). But equally *chraomai* may designate my behavior or my attitude. ... So *chraomai* is also a certain attitude. *Chresthai* also designates a certain type of relationship with other people.[164]

However, before we move on, allow me to push this line of thinking even further, arguably beyond Agamben's own conclusions. My sense is that perhaps what is really at stake here, in the peculiar relationality of *chresthai*, might actually be no ontology at all. In fact, it seems to me that this affective middle voice instead orchestrates a usely violation of the very type of interiority that ontological categories are predicated on. Being receptive to this anti-ontological disturbance of interiority can move our attention toward a form of general 'affectability' – to freely borrow Ferreira da Silva's term – that the scene of use stages, returning us to the kind of perversion and corruption of individuating usership addressed at the start of this chapter. [165] One major question I want to examine in this book, therefore, is the following: what would be of our design practices if such an affectability as disturbance in use were to be not reluctantly acknowledged as an undesirable inconvenience, but rather the very phenomenon we seek to magnify, (re)immerse into, and collectively study?

COORDINATE 4 // INAPPROPRIABILITY

Redard's summary above offers the opportunity for a schematic review. Rethinking the paradigm of use with Agamben can essentially be summarized by two interconnected propositions. First, use becomes a "certain attitude" of playful, gestural profanation. Second, this attitude is in turn both manifested within and made possible by partaking in a "certain type of relationship": the affectivity and reciprocal immanence of a pre- or even anti-subjective sociality. There is another element, however, that has so far remained

164 Redard cited in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 31.

165 Ferreira da Silva, *Global Idea of Race*, 42-55.

very much in the background throughout this formulation, and to which I shall now turn. This element, somewhat binding together the certain how and certain with of what we might tentatively call a sociality of use, represents use's paramount hallmark in Agamben's elaboration. For Agamben, use is established as a (political) category that profoundly troubles the concept of *property*, of ownership.

To better appreciate what Agamben is getting at in this instance, it is worth reflecting on how, for him, this peculiar usely disruption of proprietary forms comes to enact an atypical mode of *poverty*. Informed by the exemplary yet – in his account – ultimately failed arrangements of the Franciscan order, Agamben indeed proposes to reconsider the notion of poverty in a way that could extricate it from its purely 'negative dimension', as denoting the mere lack of wealth.[166] Granted, such an exhortation could understandably feel rather tone-deaf, coming from the privileged position Agamben very plausibly occupies. Yet, it is hopefully not an excess of intellectual generosity to clarify that his effort in this case shall be read neither as a glib romanticisation of material indigence and immiseration nor, as political theorist Saul Newman does, as an exercise in 'radical, yet ultimately self-sacrificial, passivity'.[167] Rather, Agamben is seeking to articulate a practice of committed, outright refusal of the very logic and terms of property by rethinking the category of poverty 'not only in relation to having, but also and *above all* in relation to being'.[168] This way, the mode of radicalised poverty that Agamben extrapolates from the example of Franciscanism entails a process of maintaining a relation to one's *being* as entirely beyond any proprietary claims: such a relation is instead given, again, only as a relation of use. This is explicitly spelled out when, in *The Highest Poverty*, he specifies that use is 'a relation to the world insofar as it

166 Giorgio Agamben, *Creazione e anarchia: L'opera nell'età della religione capitalistica* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2017) 67-8.

167 Saul Newman, 'What Is an Insurrection? Destituent Power and Ontological Anarchy in Agamben and Stirner', *Political Studies* 65, no. 2 (2017): 296.

168 Agamben, *Creazione e anarchia,* 59 (emphasis added).

is inappropriable'.[169] Rather than a simple antithesis to or inverse of ownership, Agamben's use therefore comes to name a form of acting whereby it is not possible to straightforwardly possess nor to be possessed, and which therefore more radically *deactivates* proprietorial modes of relating: "if you will not share it you cannot use it," Le Guin's character would say.

We could say that this use, then, does not represent an opposing, counterbalancing, hence stabilising force vis-à-vis property: instead, it altogether profanes the sacredness of property-in-action – which, to my mind, is also to say that it profanes agency, as something discreet living and non-living entities alike supposedly possess. This marks use as a form of what Agamben calls a 'destituent power'. [170] Unlike a *potenza costituente*, or constituent power, which is the sovereign destruction and overthrowing of a present order so as to replace it with a newly composed one, Agamben's destituent power can perhaps be defined as an insurrectionary '*exodus* from the order of sovereignty altogether', to put it in Newman's words.[171] The logic of Agamben's destituent power is therefore one of flight, 'by virtue of its avoidance of any engagement with what it negates':[172] it is a subtraction from order and ordering itself, a way of remaining entirely outside of the fold of proprietorial sovereignty. Destituent is a practice that, as Agamben puts it, 'can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather, only as *use*'.[173]

169 Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 144.

170 In Italian *"potenza destituente"*, see: Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?'.

171 Newman, 'What Is an Insurrection?', 289.

172 Sergej Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 142.

173 Agamben, *Means without End*, 117. This distinction between constituent and destituent power can equally be applied to my earlier discussion of how creative forms of use (like adhocism and NID) are still operating within a functionalist horizon, unlike the playfully destituent use I am seeking to explore: the former could be somewhat inappropriately described as a constituent use, in that a prior protocol of action is consciously or unconsciously subverted so as to establish an alternative one.

The importance of this mechanism of destitution through and as use of the logic of property is absolutely key here. Why? Because, we should recall, if (a) 'in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake',[174] but also if (b) use identifies a relation of absolute inappropriability, as it has now been established, then (c) it is this "using subject" itself that, through the relation of use by which it is not so much constituted as destituted, can never be appropriated, can never become property. Or, to put it in more straightforward terms: *that which through use gets destituted, therefore becoming and being maintained as entirely inappropriable, is no less than oneself*. A "using self", thereby disarticulated from the logic of (self-)possession – or, to recall Nichols' argument in Chapter 1, of propertisation. This is why Agamben draws attention to Foucault's late development, alongside the notion of "care of the self," of a new formula: '*se deprendre de soi-même*'.[175] Signifying neither deficiency nor renunciation – and certainly not passive self-sacrifice either – this precept arguably comes to indicate not so much a 'self-detachment' or a 'disassemblement of the self', as Foucault's translator Paul Rabinow proposes,[176] but more accurately a form of self-dispossession. Indeed, as Agamben himself explains, through this formula the otherwise largely individuating notion of care-of-oneself 'gives place to a dispossession and abandonment of the self, where it again becomes mixed up with use'.[177] A self-dispossession, then, enacted through and, more important still, *as* use.

In light of all this, let me formulate a couple of final questions. What if that which we understand as "myself" is but a deluded hangover from a prior experiential and somatic entanglement, from the peculiarly profane affectivity of use? What if this self is not something that is asserted and congealed, not a form of privatised wealth

174 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 30.

175 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 34.

176 Paul Rabinow, 'Introduction: The History of Systems of Thought', in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth – Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Vol.1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), xxxviii-xl.

177 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 34.

that is owned and accumulated, not an end in itself, but instead precisely what is lost or given away as a pure means, if only momentarily, in and through use? A relation of use, when intended in these terms, may therefore be grasped not as the private triumph of interiority that the figure of the user as intentional agent produces and reproduces, but as the event of a threshold: what Agamben already defined in *The Coming Community* as 'the experience of being-within an outside' – an 'ek-stasis', a practice of standing [*stasis*] outside [*ek*] of oneself.[178] This alternative formulation therefore invites us to reconsider what we appear to bring to the scene of use as independent users, "our" sensibility, not in terms of one's innermost singular manifestation of personal character but rather, to say it in Butler's words, as 'a constitutive relation to *a sensuous outside*'.[179]

Now, despite its remarkable conceptual richness, it has been noted that Agamben's writings hardly offer much more than scattered, ambiguous hints as to how an enactment of this ecstatic, self-dispossessive practice of use might actually look and feel like today.[180] The playing of children with obsolete objects?[181] The improvisational gesturing of a dancing body?[182] Contextually distant practices of Monasticism? Some commentators have argued that this vagueness is actually deliberate, aimed at eschewing the constituent normativity of a programmatic approach, which 'would reinstantiate the means-end logic to be overcome'.[183] Similarly, within the

178 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 68.

179 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 95.

180 For example, Prozorov writes that 'With a few exceptions Agamben's works rarely address concrete contemporary or historical events and when they do, it is usually in an abstruse historico-philosophical context that is apparently devoid of immediate political significance'. Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*, 1-2.

181 See: Agamben, *State of Exception*, 64; Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation', 76.

182 Agamben, 'What Is a Destituent Power?', 70. Also see Erin Manning's 2007 work on affect and dance, *Politics of Touch*, itself explicitly influenced by Agamben's writing on gesture.

183 Gavin Rae, 'Agency and will in Agamben's coming politics', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44, no.9 (2018): 981-82.

context of this book, to dictate what design practices are to do with the coordinates identified throughout this chapter, to imbue these with a proper function, clearly would be missing the point. Still, by charting Agamben's longstanding engagement with the question of use my hope was and is twofold. First, that such coordinates can be picked up and rearranged within new compositions, incorporated into collective practices of corporeal experimentation. Second, that Agamben's formulation as a whole might invite us to see use not just as a capacity to act upon the world and "others" – to perform and assert our agency – but also and above all as a pragmatic expression of the many ways we are affected, constituted, and ultimately destituted by them.

A shift of this kind thus challenges us to design material arrangements not only to empower (in many instances a doubtlessly vital task, of course!) but also, perhaps, to sense more intensely and indeed to tend to our affectability. It challenges us to design ways not only of effecting but also of 'consenting to be affected', as Garcés would say – and, relatedly, to rethink design itself not primarily as 'a space of power but rather [as] one of vulnerability'.[184] It challenges us to design ways of noticing how we are always already interfering and interfered with, implicated in, and indebted to each other – even if asymmetrically, to be sure. Which is to say, finally: it challenges us to design collective infrastructures for moving and being moved, for sensing and being sensed, for processes of *becoming each other's condition of possibility*.

184 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 69, 15.

4

Study

With each lucid dream I appeared to stand outside of myself, to understudy a self akin to myself yet other than myself. In short I knew Amaryllis and I were involved in a series of infinite rehearsals, infinite in material but true (however elusive), unswerving (however paradoxical) in spiritual mind.

Wilson Harris, The Infinite Rehearsal, 2013 [1987]: 157.

'To learn is to learn how to use something', writes Ahmed about the manner in which we are often compelled to navigate a world of functions and affordances that, whether explicitly intelligible or requiring deciphering, indicate to us the right way, the proper way, the straight way.[1] Learning leads us to use or, rather, to *correct* use. Ahmed's pithy comment powerfully renders the didactic normativity that practices of use tend to command. The previous chapter attempted to destabilise the instrumental horizon of use presupposed by this particular perspective and, relatedly, to scramble the default temporality and causality that are at stake in such a functionalist, teleological, intention-driven model. In other words, I tried to contend that the scene of use does not *have* to be conceived as the concluding plot point in a story of volitional prehension: not necessarily as the user's accomplished exercise of mastery and sovereignty over – hence extrication from – the world, but perhaps also as a form of pragmatic (re-)immersion into the richness of social life.

Now, when considering the overview of designerly attitudes towards use presented in Chapter 2, it could be argued that inverting the terms of the relationship in Ahmed's above formulation produces an equally valid claim: that to use is to learn. Using to learn is indeed a staple methodology across very different approaches to design. Whether it is from a user-centred, ethnographic, informal, or speculative design angle, the scene of use is frequently enlisted

1 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 50.

in the pursuit of various kinds of learning objectives. Gathering user-generated data for product innovation, eliciting unexpected insight into people's everyday experiences, identifying opportunities for tactical misuse, and teaching citizens about democratic participation are some of the examples we encountered earlier on. An intention to question what might be left unexamined in this use-as-learning paradigm, as well as to then articulate an alternative conception of what could be characterised as use's studiousness, is the main focus of this chapter. To be clear, any concerns with how or where pedagogy intersects practices of *design* are here, once again, entirely secondary and subordinated to how or where pedagogy intersects practices of *use*. This means that, for instance, I will not be examining processes of so-called thinking-through-making, critical making, or learning-by-doing, mostly inspired by Deweyan pragmatism, such as those described by Donald Schön in his influential book *The Reflective Practitioner*, whereby *designing* offers to the design researcher opportunities for innovation and 'self-education'.[2] Nor am I interested in a broad appraisal of how the more or less formal discipline of design is incorporated or leveraged as part of pedagogic efforts.[3]

With this in mind, the present chapter seeks to chart and reconfigure the entwining of use and study by following a structure similar to that of Chapter 3. Indeed, I will begin the first of two parts by trying to disconnect the practice of study from its common-sense association with the dominant logics and agendas of learning and education, as well as from the university as a primary site of its entrapment. This will then lead me to address the figure of the student, who, much like the user, cannot help but becoming a potent

2 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983), 299. Also see: Matt Ratto, 'Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life', *The Information Society* 27, n.4 (2011): 252-60.

3 E.g., Philippa Lyon, *Design Education: Learning, Teaching, and Researching Through Design* (Abingdon: Routledge & Gower, 2011); Mike Tovey (ed.), *Design Pedagogy: Developments in Art and Design Education* (Farnham: Gower, 2015).

device of individuation. Somewhat synthesising this critical insight, Part I will close with the articulation of a few notes on the way in which discourses of improvement not only significantly inflect our perspective on study, but can also highlight important points of theoretical and pragmatic convergence between studious and use-based modes of individuation. Finally, the second part of the chapter will resume and extend the conceptual work started in Chapter 3 by formulating a set of additional coordinates, complementing those already presented so as to firmly establish use as a studious practice.

Part I: Study beyond common sense

MODES OF STUDY

Critical pedagogists have long sought to problematise the common-sense grip that the two tropes of education and learning have on study, questioning how they inflect or indeed taper studious practices. A highly celebrated and early example of this tradition is the work of Paulo Freire who, in his 1968 classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, developed a scathing critique of what he described as the 'banking concept of education'.[4] What Freire's essay took issue with was the reduction of education to a transfer of information from teachers to students, whereby the role of the latter consists in nothing but passively 'receiving, filing, and storing the deposit' – i.e., knowledge.[5] To this hierarchical and crudely transactional model Freire opposed a 'dialogical, problem-posing', and egalitarian approach to education. [6] Only a few years later, in 1971, Freire's long-time friend Ivan Illich published another highly influential appraisal of education in his *Deschooling Society*, where he contended that the institutionalisation of study implemented through the formal education system is an instrument of alienation,

4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 45.

5 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 45.

6 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 66.

discrimination, and indoctrination on a mass scale. The primary aim of the schooling system, Illich thus argued, is quite simply 'teaching the need to be taught'.[7] Much in a similar vein, unschooling advocate John Holt's important 1976 book, eloquently titled *Instead of Education*, concluded that 'education – compulsory schooling, compulsory learning – is a tyranny and a crime against the human mind and spirit'. [8]

The vast and diverse body of critical pedagogic literature that has since emerged has challenged from multiple angles the various shortcomings not only of the education system, but also of the discourse and practice of learning as such. Most prominently, philosopher of education Gert Biesta has been dissecting a process he describes as 'learnification': a far-reaching logic that has progressively pulled off track what Biesta sees as an otherwise inherently emancipatory 'educational agenda'.[9] What is particularly relevant to the present exploration is that, according to Biesta's assessment, the language of learning is essentially 'individualistic and individualizing': indeed, because 'it is not possible to learn for somebody else', learning is by definition 'something one can only do for oneself'[10] – which is the case, he clarifies, 'even if [learnification] is couched in such notions as collaborative or cooperative learning'.[11] As Biesta amongst others has contended, this learnifying impulse finds its purest and most noxious expression in the trope of so-called '*lifelong learning*' – but, increasingly, in its complementary variation of 'life-*wide* learning', too.[12] The compulsion for lifelong learning, to which we will return in due course, regards every situation as an opportunity or, in fact, as a 'lifelong responsibility' for further

7 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 2002 [1971]), 47.

8 John C. Holt, *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better* (New York, NY: Delta, 1976), 222.

9 Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 18–9.

10 Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2013), 63.

11 Biesta, *Good Education*, 18.

12 Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*, 61.

'investment in one's own human capital',[13] as Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons note, thus functioning as 'a progress-orientated accumulative model of learning that pervades institutions and subjectivities today',[14] in Annette Krauss' words.

The paradigms of education and learning, when not deployed interchangeably, have been questioned either in combination or separately, often in the attempt of salvaging one of the two terms. As we have seen, Biesta, for one, has been at pains to distance educational discourse from the rationality of learning, which he deems problematically devoid of a specific content, direction, and outcome. But his persistence in counterposing these notions is confusing on two levels. First, Biesta's emphasis on the purpose-driven nature of education appears to endorse, whether consciously or not, an instrumentalisation of study [15] – a tendency that Tyson E. Lewis instead challenges rather skilfully despite drawing on Biesta, as we will see later on.[16] Second, and more troublesome still: if one of the key purposes of Biesta's educational agenda is its 'subjectification function', by which he means 'how individuals ... can be independent – or as some would say, autonomous – subjects of action and responsibility',[17] and if what marks education as inevitably relational is that it entails 'someone educating someone else',[18] how are we to understand this logic as not itself fully enmeshed in what Moten calls a 'metaphysics of individuation'?[19] Exemplifying a complete reversal of Biesta's standpoint, Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo

13 Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue* (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture and Society Publishers, 2013), 95.

14 Annette Krauss, 'Lifelong Learning and the Professionalized Learner', in *Unlearning Exercises: Art Organizations as Sites of Unlearning*, edited by Binna Choi, Annette Krauss and Yolande van der Heide (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 74.

15 Biesta, *Good Education*, 18–9.

16 See: Tyson E. Lewis, *Inoperative Learning: A Radical Rewriting of Educational Potentialities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

17 Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*, 64.

18 Biesta, *Good Education*, 18.

19 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 275.

Esteva draw on Holt's and Illich's pleas for de/unschooling society, and in their spirited essay *Escaping Education* instead embrace the indeterminate, grassroots nature of learning. As they argue, learning is a fundamental art of living that 'preceded education and the educational system by millennia'.[20] Conversely, the institution of education, driven by a modernising (i.e. Westernising) and universalising impetus, has bridled and literally colonised the diversity of ancestral, indigenous, and communal practices of learning and teaching, even (and especially) in its multiculturally neo-colonial guise.[21] However, if Biesta's account, like Freire's before him, is undoubtedly engaged in an idealisation of educational discourse,[22] the same might be said about Prakash and Esteva's romanticised articulation of 'living as learning'[23] – a formulation that is uncomfortably compatible with the lifelong learning imperative mentioned above.

It is by taking heed of these tensions and conundrums that political theorist Eli Meyerhoff has produced an impassioned call for study practices unbound by uncritical assumptions and moralising idealisations. In *Beyond Education*, Meyerhoff's sharp historical analysis retraces the contingent set of discourses and material conditions leading to the far from inevitable subsumption of study under the logics of education and learning. Moreover, Meyerhoff contends that an accumulative, appropriative logic and a related regime of separation are baked into both frameworks from the start, rather than being an unfortunate deviation from their originally virtuous epistemologies. '"Education" and "learning" are both *humanist* concepts', Meyerhoff states: as such, 'they center the human subject

20 Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008), 16

21 Prakash and Esteva, *Escaping Education*, 1–31.

22 On this point, Meyerhoff notes that 'Biesta gets caught in tautological and paradoxical formulations (e.g., "the language of learning tends to obscure those dimensions that make education educational"), because he is stuck in a humanist framing of politics and study'. Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 59.

23 Prakash and Esteva, *Escaping Education*, 110.

as the one who is educated and learns'[24] through a process that is invariably organised as 'an ascending, individualized, and individualizing trajectory'.[25] As we shall see in due course, this 'vertical imaginary' of emancipatory rise is often propped up by some variations of a 'romantic narrative' based on simple binary oppositions or figures (such as ignorance vs knowledge, success vs failure, graduate vs dropout) and enforced through what Meyerhoff defines as 'an affective pedagogical economy of credit and debt'.[26]

Now, as the enticing narratives of uplift offered by education and learning strive to hold sway over the practice of study, it is also important to reckon with one of the principal *sites* historically devoted to the worship and reproduction of those very narratives: the university. Indeed, is the pedagogical economy of credit and debt Meyerhoff refers to not the very currency – both figuratively and concretely, both morally and financially – of higher education? Of course, much has been written about the university, about its multifarious infrastructural roles in the arrangement of social life, and particularly about the alleged crisis it is undergoing. Whether it is rampant neoliberal managerialism or the relentless privatisation and marketisation of public higher-education – to be sure, both very real – broadly speaking, this is a "crisis" often bemoaned by those many principled pundits of liberal mould who tend to decry the stifling of so-called academic freedom, the commodification of an unquestionably noble pursuit and production of knowledge, and the transformation of what was once meant to further enlist students in civic life into a crass pipeline to the job-market. In other words, this perspective nostalgically mourns the seizing by external evil forces of an intrinsically virtuous institution, a temple of equality that has been, or is being, infiltrated and spoiled by philistine greed.[27]

24 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 58.

25 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 42.

26 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 15.

27 Apart from Chapter 1 of the already-cited book by Meyerhoff, for a brilliant account of this literature see for example Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017), particularly Chapter 3. As Collini notes, a

And yet, the fact that today's universities, in many corners of the world, increasingly and in unprecedented ways *do* wreak havoc on communities through their gentrifying force thus acting primarily as assets for corporate interests, [28] *do* play a proactive part in surveillance and policing initiatives targeting already oppressed groups,[29] and *do* indeed produce the immiseration of a large portion of their highly-disposable workforce while chaining students to a lifetime of financial debt,[30] might have us look back at earlier times through rose-tinted glasses. Which is to say, as Meyerhoff outlines so cogently in his account: the many innovatively nefarious deeds to which the *contemporary* university participates might blind us to more fundamental ways in which this institution has *always* been (a) integral to systemic socio-economic marginalisation and/because (b) predicated upon more or less explicit regimes of accreditation and accumulation – of which the current state of things is a natural development, not a deviation. As Ahmed notes, contrary to the platitudes of disinterested knowledge production and unfettered exploration we might be tempted to regurgitate, 'the very idea of a modern university was a utilitarian idea':

(rather trite) sub-genre within this idealised appraisal of the university has emerged which specifically focuses on the value of the humanities.

28 Davarian L. Baldwin, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities* (New York, NY: Bold Type Books, 2021). Baldwin also reports the words of a plaintiff unreservedly describing Princeton University as 'a hedge fund that conducts classes'.

29 Hareem Ghani and Ilyas Nagdee, 'Islamophobia in UK universities', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, ed. *Irene Zempi and Imran Awan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 188–97; Barbara Cohen and Waqas Tufail, 'Prevent and the Normalization of Islamophobia', in *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge For Us All*, edited by Farah Elahi and Omar Khan (London: Runnymede Trust, 2017), 41–5.

30 Regarding the former, see the COLA (cost-of-living-adjustment) wildcat strikes initiated at UC Santa Cruz https://payusmoreucsc.com/campaign-timeline/, as well as Aimée Lê and Jordan Osserman, 'Who will survive the university?', *Radical Philosophy* 2, no.10 (Summer 2021): 63–8. Regarding the latter, see for example Angela Monaghan and Sally Weale, 'UK student loan debt soars to more than £100bn', *The Guardian*, 15th June 2017; Richard Cooke, Michael Barkham, Kerry Audin, Margaret Bradley, and John Davy, 'Student debt and its relation to student mental health', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28, no.1 (2004): 53-66.

indeed, Ahmed continues, we must resolutely 'challenge any notion that utility arrives late to the university, as if utility is a foreign policy imposed on universities by governments'.[31] Stevphen Shukaitis also articulates this with exceptional clarity when he writes that

> There is no "golden age" of the university that one can refer to or attempt to go back to; it is not a "university in ruins" that can be rebuilt to return to its former glory precisely because it is a space that has always played a role in creating and maintaining questionable forms of power.[32]

In other words, the modern university – much like the Economy, the State, the Police – is neither in crisis nor broken. The modern university is (still) doing exactly what it was designed to do from the word go, albeit in ever-novel ways: regulate study, impose scarcity of access to the general wealth *we* collectively bring into it, and this way, ultimately, individuate. The modern university is and always has been first and foremost 'a machine for stratification' wherein 'separation [is] misunderstood as a reward': a gigantic experiment in 'collective individuation'.[33] It is the temple for the worshipping of the vicious and viciously alluring cult we call meritocracy, which really is nothing other than the 'imposition of scarcity masquerading as the management of scarcity'.[34]

Bearing all of the above in mind is important here, not out of a residual, wounded, reparation-oriented attachment to the *idea* of the university itself, but for it can help us puncture the hallucinations of exceptionality that the education sector is so dedicated to inducing and cultivating. As Harney and Moten have accurately described it in a recent interview:

> Academia – which is to say the university as a business, which

31 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 143.

32 Stevphen Sukaitis, 'Infrapolitics & the Nomadic Educational Machine', in *Combination Acts: Notes on Collective Practice in the Undercommons* (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2019), 200.

33 Harney and Moten, 'university: last words' 4-6.

34 Moten et al., 'Refusing Completion', 14.

> it has always been, and as an institution that does what Kant calls the regulatory business of the understanding – fosters this being lost in how special the university is, either as especially good or as especially bad, and therefore fosters this sense in academics of how special we are.[35]

And puncturing this fantasy is itself important, then, neither as a narcissistic act of self-flagellation nor as an exercise in anti-intellectualism, but precisely because one of the key ways in which the university's purported special status is asserted is by claiming 'it has the natural monopoly for the practice of study'.[36] In fact, the *practice* of study, at least as it is addressed here, '*is not*, except incidentally, about the university',[37] again borrowing from Harney and Moten. Meyerhoff is particularly sensitive to the necessity of disidentifying the practice of study from the institution of the university – but also, as we have seen, from the horizons of education and learning – so as to provide a more capacious articulation of what it means to study. Meyerhoff writes:

> I see study, generally, as *an activity in which people devote attention to the world*. This sustained attention modifies their capacities and dispositions for understanding the world.[38]

Given that "devoting sustained attention to the world" is something that can be practised in countless ways, rather than proposing yet another normative definition Meyerhoff's formulation instead shifts our focus onto the co-existence of multiple competing 'modes of study'. [39] What sets various modes of study apart is the specific way each of these goes about collecting and composing 'the *means* and *relations* of study', whereby 'differently composed means of study create enabling or limiting conditions on the formation of

35 Harney and Moten, 'When we are apart'.

36 Stefano Harney, 'QMP25 – Undercommons (with Stefano Harney)', *Quarantined Market Podcast*, 5th June 2020 [Podcast], min. 07:53.

37 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 123.

38 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 13 (emphasis added).

39 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 13.

relations of study' and, conversely, 'differently composed relations of study limit or enable who can access the means of study and how they can study with them'.[40]

Meyerhoff's theorisation of modes of study allows us to clarify two important aspects. First, Meyerhoff emphasises that all 'modes of study are bound up with different modes of world-making', too – those promoted by the education-, learning-, and university-based modes of study being but *some* 'among many alternatives', in spite of their normative and hegemonic aspirations.[41] It follows that, if the world-(un)making project that this book wishes to contribute to is one thoroughly disconnected and disconnective from the paradigm of individuation underpinning education, learning, and university logics, then this disconnection might come about through the particular mode of organising our practices of attention as well as our attention to practices – i.e., through the modes of study we engage in. In this respect, it is striking to note a parallel between Meyerhoff's argument and Ahmed's take on (modes of) use: 'use', Ahmed maintains in a beautiful passage already mentioned in Chapter 3, 'involves a way of arranging worlds as well as ourselves. We are in this sense already "in use" before we pick up objects; to inhabit a world is to be inhabited by use'.[42] Which brings us to a second point. Because the practice of use, as this book has been arguing, can itself catalyse multiple competing ways of devoting attention to the world, then use too should be considered as a mode of study or, better still, as conductive to *multiple modes* of study, on a par with all other overtly intellectual pursuits we tend to associate with this domain.

But why folding together study and use, as this book set out to do? As Meyerhoff and others teach us, we should resist the temptation of thinking that studying outside of a logic of individuation was once easy, let alone encouraged by institutions such as the

40 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 13–4.

41 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 5.

42 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 26.

university. Yet, it is also true that genuinely collectivised practices of study are increasingly being captured and co-opted, regulated and parcelled out, packaged and branded, when not altogether interdicted in ever-novel ways by universities and other allied cultural spaces and institutions. And if in the current predicament there is one aspect of study that, I think, is often invisibilised, misconstrued, downplayed, or treated as an ancillary add-on, that is its sensorial character. It seems to me that the conspicuous curtailments to social practices operationalised in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic through forms of physical distancing and online-only participation are best interpreted in relation to study not so much as pedagogic "innovations" of sorts – whether temporary or permanent, in equal measure (probably) inevitable and (conveniently) profitable – but, more pointedly, as an unmistakeable reminder of how degraded study feels when completely eviscerated of its haptic and kinetic dimensions.[43] Granted, on the other hand it is important not to fall for reactionary tropes that demonise virtuality wholesale while romanticising more "authentic" proximity, not only because doing so can prop up a geography of exclusivity and division, but also because even 'when we are apart we are not alone' either.[44]

To be clear, as I will discuss later in this chapter, an attention to what is not only discursive but also physical and motional about study is just as comfortably repositioned as a tool for experiential introspection and the assessment of the central character within an education- or learning-oriented mode of study: the student.[45] However, precisely therein lies the advantage of adopting

43 For some helpful perspectives on the materialities of study, beyond the work of Erin Manning which I engage with more closely in Chapter 5, see for example the essays in Nathan Snaza, Debbie Sonu, Sarah E. Truman, and Zofia Zaliwska (eds.), *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2016).

44 Harney and Moten, 'When we are apart'.

45 For instance, various pedagogic approaches, especially when informed by strands of cognitive science, have had a longstanding interest in the "embodied" dimensions of learning and education. Just to cite two influential texts, see: Neil D. Fleming and Colleen Mills, 'Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection', *To Improve The Academy* 11, no.1 (1992): 137-55; Viktor

Meyerhoff's perspective on study, which recognises the latter's manifold modalities and thus invites a more nuanced analytic and pragmatic approach to the forms, content, and socialites of studious practice.

DECOUPLING STUDY AND STUDENT

Not unlike what was done in my previous assessment of the user, then, it is here germane to examine more closely the peculiar figure of the student, so as to formulate a few considerations directly relevant to the trajectory followed by this book. Indeed, my sense is that, in the context of education- or learning-based modes of study, the student represents a key device tasked much with the same function as the user in design, but also as the citizen in politics, the person in law, the Self in philosophy and psychology: to parcel out social life into fundamentally separate (even if interacting), separable (even if via interaction) units.

While perhaps at first showing up on the scene of study as a superficially uncomplicated creature, only an entirely absent-minded glance would fail to notice how the student is, in fact, the crucible of a dizzying array of interpellations. I am confident that even those most uninterested in this topic will be at least to some degree familiar with popular debates around the contested role of the student within a thoroughly commodified education system, whereby this figure comes to see itself and be treated primarily as a consumer in the learning marketplace but also, more broadly, as a service customer in the so-called experience economy. As already hinted earlier on, such a shift tends to be accompanied by a spirit of self-entrepreneurialism, individual responsibilisation, and the compulsion to invest in what students (must) understand to be their human capital, but also by a plethora of governance and self-governance strategies designed to ensure that "student life" is more easily subjected to management

Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth: A Textbook on Art Education* (New York, NY: Macmillan Co., 1947).

and (self-)discipline.[46] By contrast, a more proactive and participatory stance is often invoked or inferred: a plea typically calling for a general democratisation of the educational experience and a rethinking of the student-teacher relationship, but also one habitually peppered with an emphasis on both the virtues and benefits of curiosity, criticality, and dialogue for the student's personal growth. [47]

Important as they might be, it seems to me that these discussions amount to normative contentions over *who* or *what* the student ought to be. However, here I am not so much interested in what makes this or that *type* of student, nor for that matter in which student self-identity, status, or subjectivity is ethically or politically preferable.[48] Rather, I would like to contemplate perhaps in less granular terms what makes *a* student generally intelligible as such, both to itself and to others, in the current predicament. Just like with the figure of the user in the previous chapter, then, I want to consider here what it takes and what it means today for the student to be hailed as the subject and protagonist on the scene of study, so as to *then* 'move away from the problem of the figure of the student to the specificity of the student's *practice*'.[49] In other words, my

46 Luka Arsenjuk and Michelle Koerner, 'Study, Students, Universities: An Introduction', *Polygraph* 21 (2009): 3-4.

47 The late Marxist social theorist Mike Neary has been particularly vocal in lamenting this shift in role for the contemporary student, to which he counterposed the notion of student-as-producer. E.g.: Mike Neary and Joss Winn, 'The Student as Producer: Reinventing the Student Experience in Higher Education', in *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience*, ed. Les Bell, Mike Neary and Howard Stevenson (London: Continuum, 2009), 126-38. Also see: Louise Bunce, Amy Baird, and Siân E. Jones, 'The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance', *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no.11 (2017): 1958-78; Duna Sabri, 'What's wrong with 'the student experience'?', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no.5 (2011): 657-67.

48 Marteen Simons makes a valuable argument regarding recent discursive and policy-oriented shifts from the student as an institutional status to the independent learner as a self-identity: Maarten Simons, 'The figure of the independent learner: on governing by personalization and debt', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 42, no.6 (2021), 813-27.

49 Arsenjuk and Koerner, 'Study', 8 (emphasis added).

concern is primarily with the very mechanism of 'figuration' itself, as Moten puts it: at once a metaphysical and an administrative move that produces, in the case of studious practice, something we call "the student".[50] Particularly helpful in this regard is the recent work of two theorists of education, Tyson E. Lewis and – once again – Eli Meyerhoff. I shall try to briefly review some of the insight to be found in their fascinating accounts.

Over the past ten years, Lewis has strived to flesh out a theory of study based on Agamben's writings. This is despite acknowledging that Agamben 'only makes a passing gesture toward the theme of education' and that indeed his 'notes on study are sparse'.[51] That the ultimate focus of Lewis' theoretical project – like Agamben's and this book's too – is not so much a question of stable identities or subject-positions but, rather, of *processes* of subjectivation and desubjectivation is perhaps already noticeable in a terminological choice: the frequent recourse to the designation stud*ier* in place of stud*ent*.[52] Beyond this minor detail, Lewis' reading of Agamben's concept of impotentiality within a contemporary educational context has allowed him to shine a light onto the peculiar, contradictory temporalities of individuation that are at work in the making, unmaking, and remaking of the figure of the student, chiefly through the paradigm of learning. In his 2018 book *Inoperative Learning*, Lewis argues that, if the notion of *'becoming a self'* operates as a benchmark of sorts in contemporary appraisals of studious practices, there are 'three possible ethical injunctions underlying three different educational projects related to the self: self-actualization, self-acceptance, and self-cultivation'.[53] We shall see that the interplay of these injunctions taken together (Lewis himself acknowledges that they

50 Marc Bousquet, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten, 'On Study: A *Polygraph* Roundtable Discussion with Marc Bousquet, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten', *Polygraph* 21 (2009): 159.

51 Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 11, 15.

52 Lewis, *On Study*, 12.

53 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 33.

are not necessarily separate) epitomises the type of neurotic blend of exaltation and inadequacy at the heart of contemporary forms of individuation which I began to sketch out in Chapter 1. Let me attempt to summarise each of these in turn.

The first injunction to self-actualisation presents the student with a seemingly paradoxical yet very widespread instruction: 'become who you are'.[54] As Lewis observes, there is a fairly explicit determinism at play in this approach, which nudges the student down a path of self-discovery with the goal of essentially remembering and retrieving its one, true, authentic nature. A nature that was always held within the student from the start, but which needs to be actualised and, in a way, fully developed through study. Lewis goes on to underscore the dangers of such a Maslowian perspective: not only a view of societal roles and inclinations as innate and therefore strictly immutable, but also a sense that, according to this model combining determinism and developmentalism, 'Failure to self-actualize is an *ethical failure* of the self'.[55]

The second injunction targeting the student might sound vaguely tautological in that its incitement is to 'be what you are'.[56] The reader will no doubt recognise an even more popular variation of this maxim, in equal measure vapid and detestable: the quintessentially (and classically) liberal slogan "be yourself". Within the context of study practices, this tired cliché better left to fast fashion brand marketeers translates into what Lewis defines as 'educational fatalism': an ostensibly emancipatory, even caring call for self-acceptance that, while devoid of the teleological developmentalism of "become who you are", nevertheless 'reveals itself to be deterministic to the extreme'.[57] Indeed, the student thus interpellated must not simply accept but also, more tragically, *resign* itself to expressing and reproducing its current condition, whatever it might be: trapped

54 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 35.

55 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 36.

56 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 36.

57 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 37.

into the atemporal, asocial, vacuum of impenetrable self-absorption it has been thrown into and which it shall not attempt to escape.

Third and final common-sense educational injunction in Lewis' account: 'be what you become', in which case the student is called upon to an act of radical, endless, and seemingly unfettered 'self-creation'.[58] The clear subtext in this injunction is effectively that the student can be anything or anyone it wishes to be. There are no societal bounds nor material constraints to the student's act of becoming, other than its own pure will power and creativity. This makes "be what you become" a form neither of social- nor of biological- but of '*self*-determinism' that, although at least rhetorically unafflicted by normative roles, ends up being 'no different from the neoliberal entrepreneurial self'.[59] The student abiding by this injunction is ultimately a hubristic figure that, Lewis contends, is potentially the inadvertent product of a Deleuzianism gone rogue which lays bare the latter's compatibility with capitalist myths of fluid self-fashioning and disruptive impermanence.

To these three injunctions Lewis proposes a decidedly Agambenian alternative: 'be less than you are'.[60] Drawing on Agamben's meditations on impotentiality, already discussed in the previous chapter, Lewis suggests that this approach to study is one inviting studiers to indefinitely suspend the compulsion to produce clear results through, reap the benefits of, and complete their studious practices, thereby refusing to actualise (i.e., to extinguish) study's educational potentiality and exercising the capacity *not* to be or become something in particular: a learner or, more drastically still, a self. Indeed, Lewis remarks that 'To be a self, one must produce evidence of this self through actions', and learning achievements are a prime mode of proving said selfhood.[61] Conversely, Lewis' studier is an avowedly premature figure, forever keeping one step away from reaching its limits and therefore wholeness. Moreover,

58 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 37.

59 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 37-8.

60 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 38.

61 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 40.

in an interesting move that reconnects this analysis to the reconfiguration of use developed in Chapter 3, for Lewis eschewing both the determinism and the developmentalism lurking in the first three injunctions – so as to be "less than oneself", "less than a self" or, I would suggest, "not one" – also means rejecting 'the assumption that *function* and/or essence precede *use* and/or existence'.[62] In other words: the impotentiality of study consists in the studier's perpetual withdrawing from its instrumentally functionalist actualisation into learning, which is to say from its learnification, by way of a 'suspended' practice that Lewis, following Agamben, calls a 'studious play'.[63]

Although I think that Lewis' articulation at times overemphasises passivity and contemplation, which I am not convinced to be what Agamben's inoperativity is ultimately invoking,[64] it also very clearly illuminates quite a few concerns central to this book (not least in its passing questioning regarding what impotentiality might mean in a design context, through reference to the 'dis-functional' propositions of designer Katerina Kamprani).[65] One such concern that is worth flagging up now has to do with a key feature highlighted by Lewis in relation to the less-than-a-self studier. Amongst the 'dimensions of a self when the self is not operative' that Lewis lists, we find that this figure is fundamentally 'a distracted self'.[66] Importantly, in Lewis' account distraction is what disrupts or indeed dispossesses an intrinsically possessive form of attentiveness. The reader will want to bear in mind this putative polarity, which I will properly unpack and challenge later in the chapter.

Now, while Lewis' rethinking of the studier's subjectification is pivotal to a philosophy of education unmarred by impulses

62 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 38.

63 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 75.

64 I have made this point elsewhere, together with German Primera: Giovanni Marmont and German Primera, 'Propositions for Inoperative Life', *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 3 (2020), 9-10.

65 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 84.

66 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 41-3.

towards learnification, as signalled earlier on Meyerhoff instead embarks on a more thoroughgoing, materialist problematisation of both learning *and* education discourses, practices, and institutions. Taking on an abolitionist stance, I already indicated that Meyerhoff attempts to highlight 'alternatives *to* education' by disabusing us of the latter's false equivalence to study – thus also departing from debates in so-called critical university studies focused on diagnosing the perpetual "crisis" plaguing an education system purportedly in need of reform.[67] His project lays out a piercing historical account of the development of a specific educational logic that is arguably still dominant in today's context and which has had profound implications for the figuration of study's ostensible subject. Although of course pedagogic or scholarly practices and structures of various kind have existed across different cultural and geographic contexts since time immemorial, Meyerhoff highlights how what we *now* commonly understand as "education" rests on a crucial administrative move dating back to the Late Middle Ages: the formal organisation of study and therefore of students into ascending levels.

Meyerhoff retraces 'the emergence of the verticalist mode of study' to the *Brethren of the Common Life* (also the *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*), the most prominent religious confraternity within the orbit of the Roman Catholic movement *Devotio Moderna* (Modern Devout), operating in the Low Countries (or present-day Netherlands) and Lower Germany since the late-fourteenth-century.[68] In Meyerhoff's telling, this was a highly significant innovation that went on to shape the modern concept of education, predating the first recorded signs of the latter term in both French and English (appearing in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries respectively), and which thereby assisted 'the rise of capitalism, colonialism, and the state'.[69] Diverging from

67 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 61.

68 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 115.

69 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 27.

coeval and more horizontalist practices developed by 'other converts who were stigmatized and repressed as heretics by church authorities', the Sisters and Brothers centred studious activities in the service of an individualised and 'lifelong project of spiritual progress'.[70] This was aimed at '*recrafting* the self', rather than 'escaping or transcending' it, envisaging this as 'bounded but malleable' through study.[71] Indeed, Meyerhoff argues, the 'theories and methods of self-care' developed by the confraternity were meant to invite their members to take personal responsibility for 'cultivating interiority' – not unlike the Greco-Roman "technologies of the self" described by Foucault[72] – and thereby propel them on an upward trajectory of gradual 'self-improvement'.[73] This spirituality-oriented partitioning was then formalised and coded into the Sisters and Brothers' schools, partly due to an increasing influx of pupils, through the institutional separation of students into several 'grade levels' – an approach that eventually spread across Europe and beyond.[74]

Importantly, Meyerhoff's work goes on to show how much of this vertically arranged paradigm of study, far from having vanished, has in fact become crystallised as common-sense in today's conceptions of education, even if in fully secularised and revised form. On an rhetorical level, today's student is thrust onto a path beginning from a state of inadequacy and immaturity and proceeding or rather ascending, by way of education, 'toward autonomous self-governance' – whether or not this goal is framed as a fixed end-point or as a forever-receding destination, as in the

70 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 116, 119.

71 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 119.

72 E.g., see: Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmilian, 2005 [2001]).

73 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 118-19.

74 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 121. Meyerhoff suggests that Erasmus and John Calvin, who were themselves influenced by and connected to the confraternity, were likely the channels through which this verticalist arrangement reached England. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 122-23.

case of "lifelong learning".[75] Such an educational journey is still arranged according to a 'linearly sequenced and vertically imaged narrative', pragmatically institutionalised rather than merely ideological, the delivery of which now hinges on the construction of 'binary figures of educational value and waste (e.g., the success vs. the failure, the college-bound vs. the remedial, the graduate vs. the dropout)'.[76] Moreover, Meyerhoff notes that this work of dichotomisation functions by tapping into 'certain "emotional economies"'. He writes:

> Imagining the motion of dropping down toward becoming a dropout produces emotions of shame, fear, and anxiety. Conversely, imagining the motion of rising up toward becoming a graduate produces pride and desire. These affects are intensified by metonymic slides between the graduate and dropout figures and other figures, images, and signs. The graduate slides into association with the talented youth ... The dropout is associated with the delinquent ... This emotional economy constructs and stabilizes the boundaries and surfaces of entities in the liberal-capitalist imaginary.[77]

Within this context, Meyerhoff concludes, education functions as the indispensable means – at once ideological *and* material – through which 'an individual could transform from one side of the binary to the other' and thereby demonstrate the achievement or, at the very least, the promise of ongoing work towards maturity, independence, improvement.[78]

If we consider the above assessment vis-à-vis Lewis' claim that the paradigm of learning his work seeks to render inoperative 'contains an implicit teleology toward *improved outcomes*',[79] we can clearly see how this logic of improvement through study

75 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 40.

76 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 46, 15.

77 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 94.

78 Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 136.

79 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 4 (emphasis added).

represents a significant common theme in both accounts of the figure of the student. And to this very logic of improvement I shall now turn, in order to underscore one further point of convergence between, and therefore an important site of intervention into, use and study.

DECOUPLING STUDY AND IMPROVEMENT

Beyond its centrality to design and the handling of technical artefacts discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and as already signposted in passing at the start of this book, the category of use has played a historically prominent role, continuing into the present, in another domain: that of property rights or, to be more precise, of land law. While perhaps turning to the latter now, in a chapter dedicated to modes of study, could feel at first like a digression from the main theoretical thread, my hope is that doing so will instead prove to be a helpful gloss in my ongoing formulation of a studious use. Not least when considering that the previous chapter concluded with Agamben's appraisal of use as inappropriability and usely poverty as a practice of self-dispossession, this is indeed a line of inquiry that I want to follow here, if only schematically, for one main reason. I want to argue that taking heed of the way a particular notion of use has been leveraged in the sphere of land law, and more specifically within the context of settler colonial projects of appropriation and dispossession, can further elucidate dominant views on study in contemporary discourse and practice. As I will try to show, in both cases individuating propertisation is once again firmly lodged as the conceptual and operational fulcrum around which mainstream contemporary understandings of use and study revolve, and that a logic of improvement is the lubricant allowing this mechanism to spin. It is my hope that insight from critical, anticolonial legal theory examining land registration practices can assist this book's attempt to articulate and, most importantly, challenge property-inflected conjunctures of use and study, while also complexifying the entrepreneurial and financial frames of reference already encountered in Chapter 1.

In her outstanding 2018 book *Colonial Lives of Property*, legal scholar Brenna Bhandar produces a piercing account of ways in which land law has been mobilised and retooled as a primary organ of domination, expropriation, and accumulation across diverse geographic and historical colonial contexts. From seventeenth century Ireland, eighteen century British Columbia, and nineteenth century Australia, to twentieth century and present-day Palestine, Bhandar shows that legal frameworks and surveying processes adjudicating on specific uses of the land have been exploited as the means for legitimating the enclosure and appropriation by settlers of territories inhabited by native populations.

A particularly relevant aspect of Bhandar's work is that, much like Meyerhoff's elaboration on *modes* of study, her analysis seeks to determine what characterises the peculiar *mode* of use that land law establishes as the normative basis for appropriation. Indeed, she writes:

> The question of whether the use of a thing gives rise (or ought to give rise) to an ownership interest has long been a matter of great contestation and revolves around the social, political, and economic value attributed to *the particular form of use at issue*.[80]

As Bhandar goes on to demonstrate, it is precisely a "particular form of use" *and* its evaluation, in relation to land ownership claims, which binds together all examples of colonial jurisdiction reviewed in her investigation. The use in question points specifically to practices of *cultivation* that would conform and be legible to what she calls an 'ideology of improvement'.[81] And because cultivation has been historically framed in common-law 'within the relatively narrow parameters of English agrarian capitalism', it should come as no surprise that what constitutes land improvement – and a consequent basis for ownership interest – in this case had (and still has) everything to do with the demonstrable capacity to maximise a terrain's productivity, in terms of the crudely quantified volume of

80 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 33 (emphasis added).

81 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 35.

'agricultural output'.[82] Furthering the Roman practice of *usufructus* (usufruct), which established the right to use someone else's property (the *usus*) for the purpose of increasing and extracting its *fructus* (its benefits, products, or even profit) without however gaining ownership over it, what Bhandar is examining is a practice of granting ownership rights over a property to the individual responsible for its improvement through a cultivation-oriented mode of use.[83]

Bhandar retraces the emergence of this logic to the work of seventeenth century English polymath William Petty, which represents an important antecedent to subsequent settler rationales for native dispossession. Petty's political economic thought in the context of colonial Ireland introduced innovative systems of measurement and classification that prioritised the land's calculable profitability above all else. Conversely, uncultivated land or, for that matter, land cultivated for mere subsistence rather than trade, was 'deemed to be waste', because unprofitable, hence 'free for appropriation'.[84] What is most remarkable about the ideology of improvement championed in Petty's work is arguably the fact that the 'new mechanisms for creating and attributing value' upon which it rested appraised not only the land's productivity through cultivation.[85] Rather, at a single stroke it also assessed the worth of the *people connected to that land*, indeed treating the two as inextricably tied to one another. In other words, on the one hand, this logic identified as virtuous, 'proper subjects of law and history' those demonstrating 'the capacity, will, and technology to appropriate' by way of productivity-enhancing, thus necessarily speculation-driven land cultivation.[86] Conversely, the manifest absence of cultivation or its illegibility according to European agrarian parameters (for example, due to traditional

82 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 35-6.

83 Harney and Moten have powerfully addressed the notion of usufruct in relation to improvement and ownership, particularly as discussed in Hegel – see Harney and Moten, Improvement and Preservation.

84 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 36.

85 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 35.

86 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 8, 4.

methods) not only cast entire areas as wastelands available for appropriation, but also deemed their native inhabitants themselves 'in need of improvement as much as their waste lands were', when not regarding them as entirely 'incapable of improvement' hence irredeemably inferior and unfit to own the land.[87] As a result, Bhandar concludes that 'a concept of value emerged that linked the improvement of land through particular kinds of use (cultivation for commercial purposes) to the improvement of populations'.[88]

This way, as Bhandar notes, Petty effectively pioneered a crucial epistemological move later naturalised by the titan of classical liberalism, John Locke, and already discussed in Chapter 1 of this book: the 'fusing together of ownership and subjectivity' – the capacity to own and the capacity to be a proper (propertied) subject – which are in Petty firmly connected to a very specific mode of use.[89] It is of course no coincidence that the system of evaluation which spawned this ideology of improvement at once produced *and* presupposed a system of racialised hierarchisation. What Bhandar calls 'racial regimes of ownership' would therefore come to simultaneously inform and justify processes of land dispossession and the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius* (nobody's land), thus constituting a self-perpetuating closed loop whereby 'land requires improvement because its inhabitants are also in need of civilizational uplift, *and vice versa*'.[90] Improvement through cultivation therefore constitutes the axis around which is organised the 'identity-property nexus' that, as I have tried to argue throughout, and as Bhandar so brilliantly puts it, 'reflects the dominant episteme of a long era that remains very much with us'.[91]

Now, how to bring this excursion into colonial land law back to the question of modes of study? For a start, it should of course be

87 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 8, 56.

88 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 35.

89 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 35.

90 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 2, 181 (emphasis added).

91 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 165, 163.

pointed out that the spheres of schooling, education, and learning have been historically, conceptually, and methodologically – rather than solely metaphorically – bound up with dynamics of accumulation, oppression, and improvement-oriented propertisation not at all unlike, and indeed often linked to, those characterising land ownership.[92] It should suffice to think here of the grim example of Canada's so-called residential school system to recognise how these same spheres have been directly implicated in colonial practices of material and cultural conquest, abuse, and subjugation. Moreover, we can see reappearing in Bhandar's analysis of land uses the same dichotomising of ideas of value and waste also central to educational imaginaries of graduate versus dropout, as per Meyerhoff's earlier argument. Beyond these observations, I want to further unpack this analogy here – and, relatedly, the uncanny triangulation of use, study, and individuation that it subtends – by lingering a little longer on the question of cultivation.

Particularly in her discussion of the situation in Israel/Palestine, where Bedouins being displaced by early Zionist settlers struggled to retain legal ownership of the land precisely on the basis of their demonstrable and long-standing agricultural activity on that land, Bhandar raises a critical point. She writes that, considering 'the somewhat rapid decline of actual agricultural production in Israel' following its establishment, in political Zionist thought 'cultivation retains its force primarily as an ideological phenomenon rather than a reflection of actual economic and social realities'.[93] Which is to say that the narrative rationalising appropriation of land shifts from an agrarian to a civilisational register. And yet, as Bhandar continues, this has anything but reduced

92 So much so that Locke himself was explicitly preoccupied with both, as Meyerhoff underscores. E.g., see John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education & Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, eds. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishings, 1996 [1693, 1706]); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997 [1690]). For Meyerhoff's analysis see: Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 154-62.

93 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 119, 30.

cultivation's 'status as a flashpoint for contestations over proving entitlement to land'.[94] We might say that what came to primarily justify territorial seizure and ownership was perhaps less a question of *land* cultivation than one of *self*-cultivation: something that purportedly backwards, uncultivated natives were deemed to be lacking, no matter their proven engagement in agriculture.

It is worth noting that self-cultivation is a central pedagogic tenet in several intellectual and spiritual traditions. Although definitions can vary regarding what both the "self" and the "cultivation" in question are understood to be, this doctrine appears to be ubiquitous across different historical and cultural contexts, to the point of prompting book-length comparative explorations dedicated to 'self-cultivation philosophies'.[95] From the Hellenistic technologies of *askēsis* that preoccupied Foucault in his latter years, to the influential humanist concept of *Bildung*, canonised in pedagogical practice by the nineteenth century reformer of Prussian higher education Wilhelm von Humboldt and boasting a legacy far transcending the German-speaking world; from Deweyan liberal democratic education, to various interpretations of self-cultivation (*xiū yâng*) through learning (*xue*) in ancient Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism: the pursuit of personal improvement through edifying modes of self-cultivation features centrally in numerous ethical, moral, spiritual, and socio-political projects.[96] Whether these

94 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 119.

95 See in particular Christopher W. Gowans, *Self-Cultivation Philosophies in Ancient India, Greece, and China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Michael A. Peters, Tina Besley, and Huajun Zhang (eds.), *Moral Education and the Ethics of Self-Cultivation: Chinese and Western Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer, 2021).

96 It is clearly not possible to unpack these traditions in any meaningful way here. However, for more on the examples mentioned see, respectively: Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*; Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken, 'Do We (Still) Need the Concept of Bildung?', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no.2 (2003): 139-54; Michaela Vogt and Till Neuhaus, 'Self-Cultivation and the Concept of German *Bildung*', in *Moral Education and the Ethics of Self-Cultivation: Chinese and Western Perspectives*, eds. Michael A. Peters, Tina Besley, and Huajun Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2021) 151-67; Mark Uffelman, 'Forging the Self in the Stream of Experience: Classical

philosophies and related 'gardening metaphors'[97] are guided by developmental or deterministic injunctions (akin to those outlined by Lewis), they appear to me strikingly similar in their conception of self-cultivation as involving edifying, studious practices of striving towards the betterment, perfectibility, and/or wholeness *of the individual*. Importantly, this is whether or not they refer back to a social dimension that this cultivated self ought to *then* partake in and contribute to.

To be clear, I do not intend to claim a sufficient grasp of the nuances and quite significant differences between these complex traditions that could justify a cross-cultural and transhistorical appraisal of notions of self-cultivation. Rather, what I do want to draw attention to here is how this pervasive trope fuels today the mechanism leading from study (and use) to self-possession and back, via the ideology of improvement. In this respect, a number of passages in Bhandar's investigation offer further opportunities for tracing this symmetry between colonial land use and mainstream approaches to study that are perhaps too striking to be left unaccounted for. Let me present two examples, both in connection to the legal device of *pre-emption* that 'allowed white settlers to stake out territory and, upon improving the land by cultivation, to obtain ownership of that land'.[98] First, about an 1875 Act regulating pre-emption in British Columbia, Bhandar writes:

Currents of Self-cultivation in James and Dewey', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 319-39; Michael A. Peters, 'Educational philosophies of self-cultivation: Chinese humanism', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no.11 (2022): 1720-26. On the question of *Bildung*, Moten reflects on this term in a public lecture, proposing that its root in the German word *Bild*, meaning "picture", suggest an act of *picturing* and that, indeed, 'a fundamental element of what it is to become a subject is that one develops a picture of oneself, a sense of oneself, an image of oneself. And in a certain sense, this capacity to image oneself is a necessary prerequisite to what one might call self-possession'. Fred Moten, 'Frederick Moten | Building and *Bildung und* Blackness: Some Architectural Questions for Fela' [online video], *MIT Architecture NOMAS Lecture*, (10 March 2022), 00:33:34.

97 Michael A. Peters, 'Educational philosophies', 1721.

98 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 58.

> settlers had to prove that after two years they had made permanent improvements on the land to the value of $2.50 per acre in order to be granted letters patent for the land. It was not until a certificate of improvement had been granted to the homestead settler that the fee simple title to the land would be executed in favor of the individual.[99]

Would it be that much of a stretch to apply the above excerpt to the logic of contemporary schooling by rephrasing and repurposing it as follows: "students have to prove that after a set number of years they have made permanent improvements on themselves to the value of a given grade (a pass) in order to be granted a certificate for their competence. It is not until a certificate of improvement has been granted to the student that a diploma or degree would be owned by the individual"? A second interesting passage immediately follows the first one, this time regarding an amendment to the "Dominion Lands Act, 1883", again from British Columbia:

> in order to fulfill the conditions of cultivation, the settler had to break the land and prepare a certain number of crops in order to secure patent to the land (see clause 38(d)). Consistent with Locke's philosophy of ownership, a settler could preempt land (i.e., appropriate it) and come to own it by mixing his labor with the land and cultivating it to a degree deemed sufficient by the colonial administration.[100]

At the risk of sounding flippant, my wager here is that most of those who have gone or are going through doctoral studies in an arts and humanities subject will quickly recognise a similar logic in the incessant demand to offer an "original contribution to knowledge". For those not privy to this highest academic Eucharist, let me recycle this passage: "in order to fulfil the conditions of self-cultivation, the doctoral student has to break the disciplinary field and prepare a certain number of chapters in order to secure a doctorate.

99 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 59.

100 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 59.

Consistent with Locke's philosophy of ownership, a doctoral student could preempt a topic (i.e., appropriate it) and come to own it by mixing their contribution with a debate and cultivating it to a degree deemed sufficient by the examination committee".[101]

Let me summarise. My point here is that one rather potent way in which the terms of propertied individuation come to inflect and ultimately govern both use and study along remarkably similar lines entails framing these practices as modes of cultivation. But not just *any* mode of cultivation: cultivation *aimed at improvement*. And, crucially, not just *any* kind of improvement either: improvement *aimed at propertisation*. Aimed at creating property, at securing property, at extending property, and indeed at valorising and accumulating property – including and especially the peculiar property that is the self – through cycles of (self-)diagnosis[102] and (self-)speculation. So, as Bhandar notes, in the case of use, an improvement-oriented mode of land cultivation is the necessary condition for demonstrating and claiming individual ownership of that land in the settler colony.[103] Likewise, in the case of study, an improvement-oriented mode of *self*-cultivation is the necessary condition for demonstrating and claiming ownership of that self in learning and educational contexts.

What would it mean to now forego this logic of self-improvement and attune to a different mode of study? Let me finally turn to the work of Harney and Moten in order to sketch a possible answer.

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101 Whether there is evidence of correlation between progressive disciplinary specialisation and the rise of monocropping in intensive farming – both modes of supposedly maximising the yields of cultivation practices – is a matter that historians of agrarian capitalism might be interested in investigating, assuming that this theme has not already been explored systematically.

102 See Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 67.

103 However, in the previous chapter I tried to argue that this is equally true more generally speaking for the scene of use itself, if we can see the functionalist prism of agential intentionality as basically staking out action, whether in line with a given – i.e., designerly – protocol or through userly innovation, and then appropriating its effects by stating: "See this result right here, this use-based improvement of previous circumstances? I did it, it was me, it was my use".

Part II: Undercommon study

COORDINATE 5 // INDEBTEDNESS

At the time of writing, it has been ten years since the publication of Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* – and even longer since some of its essays were originally penned. In the meantime, while what is now considered a classic text has often been interpreted as a harshly critical indictment of Western higher education systems, its authors have not missed an opportunity to clarify that their intention was unambiguously *not* to write 'a book about the university' itself.[104] Rather, Harney and Moten's focus was and still is squarely on the practice of study, on its unassuming omnipresence which the university tries, in vain, to regulate and claim as its own product.

Perhaps *the* central engine of this regulatory force deployed by educational institutions is the device of accreditation, as already hinted above.[105] Accreditation is indeed the cursed, individuating reward that universities confer on their devoutly self-cultivating citizenry, once demonstrable improvement has cleansed them, at least until further notice, of their ostensible immaturity, inadequacy, incompetence; cleansed them of their debt to society but, most importantly, to themselves. All of which is the university's business to diagnose. That is to say: accreditation certifies individual ownership over the outcome (skills, knowledge, professionalism, etc.) of a prior engagement with study and, by extension, over oneself.

It follows that accreditation, or credit more broadly, is in every sense of the word the *end* of study. It is the end in that the credit received is the *purpose* of study in educational and learning-oriented

104 E.g., see: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'FUC 012 | Fred Moten & Stefano Harney – the university: last words' [online video], *FUC Symposium series* (09 July 2020), 00:28:19.

105 And as further evidenced by the chaos visited upon UK higher education – a veritable accreditation conveyor belt – resulting from the 2023 Marking and Assessment Boycott staged and then embarrassingly self-sabotaged by the academic workers' trade union.

contexts, and it is the end for it announces the "successful" *conclusion* of (a) study, the moment when something has been learnt, accomplished, discovered, when the studier has harvested the fruits of its self-cultivation. But Harney and Moten contend that there is a third, more fundamental sense in which credit is the end of study: it is the end in that, being it 'a means of privatisation' designed to assign individual worth to individual students (and scholars, getting credited for one's labour), it is by definition 'asocial' and thereby *foreclosing* the sociality that is otherwise flowing at the heart of study.[106] Or, at least, the sociality that is at heart of the mode of study Harney and Moten are committed to engage in and with, whether or not this happens to take place on university premises.

Thereby refusing the ideology of self-improvement and its corollary, privatising credit, and informed by the intellectual lineage that Cedric Robinson famously called the 'Black radical tradition',[107] Harney and Moten's study is instead predicated precisely on indebtedness. While this might initially seem like a counterintuitive proposition, particularly within the predicament of generalised, rampant, predatory financial lending already described via Lazzarato in Chapter 1, Harney and Moten are reminding us that debt – 'real debt' – is best understood as 'a means of socialisation'.[108] Having debts or, more accurately, *being* indebted means being in the midst, entangled. From this perspective (not unlike from that of Esposito's *munus* presented earlier on), we might see that if there is a problem with debt, it is actually its enforced end, by way of privatising mechanisms of credit and accreditation. The problem, in other words, is the interruption of debt's social circulation caused by individuating accounting and expectations for repayment. By contrast, what Harney and Moten have in mind is a 'bad debt': a debt that 'cannot be repaid', that ought not be repaid, and which, in fact, was never intended to be repaid in the first place.[109] The resulting mode of

106 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 61.

107 Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

108 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 61.

109 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 61.

study is one that not only preserves the circulation of this bad debt, by completely disassociating from any relationships to accreditation,[110] but moreover one which seeks to studiously deepen the very sense of shared indebtedness. This way, rather than an instrument for shaking off debt, study is conceived as a collective manner of getting further and further tangled up in an unpayable 'Mutual debt'.[111] A debt which is ultimately turned into 'a principle of elaboration'.[112] That is to say: study as a practice of growing ever more indebted to one another to such an extent that, Moten maintains, 'probably destabilizes the very social form or idea of "one another"'.[113]

It is important to note that if Harney and Moten have often referred to such a mode of study centring on debt rather than credit as *black* study, that is in part to signal its almost clandestine nature, as in the term "black market" for instance: a study always on the run, illicit, evading regulation and policing. However, it is also and primarily in acknowledgement of those communities that have historically been marked as chronically, even ontologically indebted, as a function of their Blackness. In other words, those peoples marked as radically external to Whiteness as *and* because either considered incapable of, or outright excluded from, accruing credit – i.e., from being self-sufficient propertied individuals – and whom, therefore, had to fugitively reformulate and indeed study their condition of indebtedness as a matter of survival, out of necessity more so than of possibility.[114]

I want to argue that the profanatory, self-dispossessive character of Agamben's use reappears most powerfully here, in relation to black

110 See: Stefano Harney, 'Stefano Harney on Study', Interviewed by Tim Edkins (July 2011), [online], uploaded 20 July 2018.

111 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 67.

112 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 150.

113 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 156.

114 Moten contends that this condition, Blackness, as an avowed disruption and refusal of the subject's capacity for and desire of self-possession, although more readily accessible to Black people because of historical circumstances, is one that is not strictly bound by epidermal attributes (and the same goes for Whiteness). It is instead, Moten argues, a 'general condition' which anyone 'has the right and an option to claim'. Moten, *Poetics*, 29-30.

study, as a deliberate, studious refusal of the kind of instrumental accreditation that is so integral to a recursive production and reproduction of 'propertied human subjectivity'.[115] It is in this sense that we might interpret Agamben's claim that, if use must 'be freed from its own value' through acts of playful profanation, as discussed earlier on, 'This liberation is the task of study'.[116] The theme of dispossession thus re-emerges enriched by dissident perspectives, traditions, experiments that Agamben has ignored, as Harney duly noted, but which similarly trouble the relationship between means and ends in their ongoing formulation of a '*fugitivity of use*'.[117] Perspectives, traditions, experiments, modes of study alerting us that, in Harney and Moten's words, 'it is the recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession ... that represents the real danger'.[118]

This apparent impasse or paradox, this tension haunting (re) appropriation-oriented struggles against dispossession already identified earlier on through Robert Nichols' work, is also the focus of a fascinating series of conversations between philosophers Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, who have sought to unpack and reconsider what they see as an ambiguous duality characterising the concept of dispossession. Butler and Athanasiou note that, on the one hand, if intended as a mode of subjugation (as it is most commonly the case), dispossession denotes a 'form of suffering for those displaced and colonised', administered through a heterogeneous set of 'imposed injuries, painful interpellations, occlusions, and foreclosures'.[119] As discussed, this is the modality of dispossession that Bhandar's analysis of use in land law as well as Marxian assessments of so-called primitive accumulation are concerned

115 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 27. Tellingly, Harney and Moten have described Black study as 'a ministry of profanation'. Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 81.

116 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 64.

117 Harney et al., 'Logistics Genealogies', 100.

118 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 17.

119 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, ix, 2. Also see: Erin Manning, 'Toward a Politics of Immediation', *Frontiers in Sociology* 3 (2019), 9.

with. However, on the other hand, Butler and Athanasiou go on to suggest that the same term can also connote a drastically different set of ideas and phenomena. Indeed, Butler argues elsewhere, beyond a state of imposed abjection, dispossession can also come to name the basic recognition that 'we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them'.[120]

The latter modality describes the 'multiple ways in which bodies are "beside themselves," dispossessed, comported beyond themselves' because entangled in a reality that manifestly exceeds individual boundaries and which forces us to confront 'the limits of self-sufficiency' and independence.[121] (And, indeed, the limits of the very concept of the individual body as our primary frame of reference, on which more below.) Far from an exceptional occurrence, this is in fact the case whenever we are engaged in purposeful acts or practices of solidarity, but also whenever we simply happen to be 'moved to the other and by the other – exposed to and affected by the other's vulnerability'.[122] It is the case, in other words, whenever we let go, joyfully or grievingly, of both the pretence of and the desire for masterful autonomy, for separation: in friendship and, some would say, in love. On the latter, Moten has pointedly remarked that, despite what common depictions of romance in films might tempt us to think, 'If you've ever fallen [in love] you know that the other person or persons don't complete you. They incomplete you', they unsettle any fantasies of individuated wholeness.[123]

This mode of dispossession, following Butler and Athanasiou, can thus be re-articulated as a process of taking flight, whether deliberately or not, from the terms of 'possession and property as the primary prerogatives of self-authoring personhood'.[124] Indeed, it can become a *practice* of taking flight from the fold of individuating

120 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 24.

121 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 178, 3.

122 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 1.

123 Moten et al., 'Refusing Completion', 10.

124 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 6.

self-possession through forms of mutual indebtedness.[125] *This* mode of dispossession, as Harney and Moten put it by referencing Édouard Glissant,[126] amounts to

> allowing ourselves to be possessed in certain other ways, allowing ourselves to *consent not to be one*, at a moment that also lets people act on us and through us, and doesn't constantly require us re-constituting ourselves.[127]

Harney and Moten's work thus exhorts us to appreciate this consensual, mutually indebted self-dispossession not just as a condition but, perhaps, as a 'kind of comportment or ongoing experiment'.[128] That is to say: as (something to) study.

COORDINATE 6 // HAPTICALITY

Such a studious social practice, which both welcomes *and* necessitates 'letting oneself become dispossessed', which revolves around studying ways of 'being disposed to be undone',[129] to incomplete each other, of getting into forms of mutual bad debt through black study, is found in what Harney and Moten have famously called *the undercommons*. But what, who, where is the undercommons?

The first aspect to clarify about the undercommons is that it is not a specific place: it is not a distinct somewhere, nor a third domain other than, yet dialectically related to, what are often described as the private and public spheres. The undercommons is not some kind of locale or setting or arena we enter into, not a club or society or constituency we claim membership of. Likewise,

125 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 6.

126 'Consent not to be a single being', as Moten notes, 'is Christopher Wink's translation of Glissant's French phrase *'consent à n'être plus un seul'*, as found in a conversation between Glissant and cultural theorist Manthia Diawara. Moten, *Black and Blur*, xv.

127 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 146 (emphasis added).

128 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 112.

129 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 1, 93.

once again, the undercommons is not something of a subsection of the university. Nevertheless, making the clever Marxian move of calling the undercommons a "social relation" would risk overlooking another important aspect, insofar as the undercommons is precisely the rejection of relationality *if* intended as 'a collection of individuals-in-relation': that is to say, it is 'the refusal of the interpersonal'.[130] Rather, what Harney and Moten call the undercommons indicates an informal, general social *practice* potentially unfolding everywhere and at all times beneath, beyond, and before formally formed, institutionally arranged, managed and policed life. Importantly, we are also alerted to the fact that this practice in and of the undercommons is not to be misconceived as something exceptional. On the contrary, Harney and Moten write that signs of the undercommons can and are most often to be found in mundane everyday activities. Moten has commented rather directly on the kind of ubiquitous ordinariness that his work on the whole has been preoccupied with, mostly under the rubric of undercommon study, indicating that what he has been grappling with is not 'the absence of something' but, rather, 'this beautiful thing that's everywhere and that at the same time is in danger everywhere that it is'.[131]

Although "study" might seem like an odd way of describing rather unassuming activities such as 'talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering', for example, the term seeks to highlight an 'incessant and irreversible intellectuality' inherent to everyday practices of social life *whenever and wherever these are collectively engaged with outside and against the terms of individuation*.[132] Whenever and wherever they are the expression of a 'general and generative antagonism'[133] towards the organs of separation seeking to capture, fracture, and regulate unruly sociality. Acknowledging all kinds of common practices as modes of study is therefore meant to

130 Harney and Moten, 'Plantocracy or Communism', 52-3.

131 Fred Moten, 'Short Circuits #2: Conversation with Fred Moten' [podcast], *The Electro-Library* (10 January 2020), 00:19:45.

132 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 110.

133 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 17.

indicate that our acting does not necessarily 'require some other step', nor 'that we need to practice something else' altogether.[134] Social life, our already ongoing and complex ways of being together, *is* an art which does not require being ennobled in some way or other in order to be considered studious. Not to labour the point too much here but, also given the strikingly similar articulation of profanation presented in the previous chapter, what this whole book is trying to argue is precisely that practices of use too can and do represent important sites of undercommon study.

Being cognisant that we do not need to start afresh, to look elsewhere entirely, is however not to throw our hands up in a quietist, liberal acceptance that nothing can nor should be done against relentless (even when low intensity) assaults on sociality. The opposite is true: Harney notes that if study might appear

> at first like a gentle and passive thing, that's because we're trying to practice being gentle and passive. However, it's also an immediately antagonistic thing: it's that primary insurgency coming forth. [...] And if you don't believe that, try studying, and very quickly you will see how many people come to your door to stop you: landlords, bosses, teachers, police, the waterman...whatever the case may be that you have had to struggle against in order to be there together, study is a struggle.[135]

Because of this, because of the constant threats to our ability to be gathered in and by collective study, being in the undercommons 'requires elaboration, it requires improvisation, it requires a kind of rehearsal. It requires *things*'.[136] Moreover, I would add, it requires the *use* of things, which is also to say a profound entanglement with them. Harney, writing with artist Valentina Desideri, spells out this pragmatic

134 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 146.

135 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, '"Give Your Home Away, Constantly" – Fred Moten and Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons In A Time of Pandemic And Rebellion (part 2)' [podcast], *Millennials are Killing Capitalism* (13 August 2020), 00:21:53.

136 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 156 (emphasis added).

quality when arguing that being "in" the undercommons is a matter of 'performance, performativity, ensemble, and improvisation'.[137]

We shall not be tempted, then, to think that by referring to this practice, to this continuously ongoing and unexceptional rehearsal, as "study", what Harney and Moten are talking about is an abstracted and abstracting, incorporeal, exclusively text-based cognitive practice. On the contrary, there is a profoundly kinaesthetic dimension to undercommon study. And it is precisely this corporeal register that this book is trying to take seriously, in its attempt to bring use and study together. Now, while design can arguably boast a longstanding (if not always explicit) engagement with the pedagogic opportunities provided by embodied practices and processes, my impression is that this convergence has frequently been informed by the same perspective on corporeality already discussed in Chapter 1. That is to say: an interest in the body as the basis for the production and reproduction of interiority (even when such interiority is negotiated through its constitutive relation to exteriority), as an individuating terrain of self-discovery, self-care, self-expression, self-actualisation, self-improvement.

A case in point here is a series of interventions by interaction design researcher Kristina Höök, which can serve as an illustrative example. Höök has sought to articulate a 'soma design theory' (and practice) by drawing on contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman's work on what he termed somaesthetics.[138] Rather tellingly, the latter concept is defined by Shusterman as a 'critical *study* and meliorative *cultivation* of the soma as a site both of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative *self-fashioning*',[139] and Höök herself underscores in no ambiguous terms

137 Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri, 'A Conspiracy Without a Plot', in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon, 2013, 128.

138 Kristina Höök, *Designing with the Body: Somaesthetic Interaction Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 117 (emphasis added).

139 Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), cited in Höök, *Designing with the Body*, 49 (emphasis added).

somaesthetics' 'overt goal' as that of 'improving ourselves and practicing the highest art of all – living better lives'.[140] Study, improvement-oriented cultivation, self-fashioning: all our main elements nested almost too conveniently into a single framework. That somaesthetics explicitly subscribes to an education-based mode of study, in keeping with Mayerhoff's terminology, and one grounded in use at that, is further testified by Shusterman's view that, as Höök puts it, 'learning body awareness and better use of our bodies is as important as educating our minds'.[141] Höök also notes that somaesthetics is at once 'an *analytical* ... a *pragmatic* ... and a *practical* study' in that its threefold objective is to probe the role of the body in 'moral and social' experience, to consider novel ways in which the body's 'functioning' can be bettered, and to test out such bodily techniques 'on ourselves'.[142] In other words, the moving and feeling body is enlisted as a 'tool of tools' (another turn of phrase taken from Shusterman) that can serve to better 'understand the world'.[143] What this understanding actually entails or leads to, other than a generic idea of sensory improvement, is not quite spelled out, as far as I can tell. Crucially, however, what is really meant by "world" here, in the 'somaesthetic design stance' proposed by Höök, actually appears to be "oneself". Höök and colleagues indeed write elsewhere that the challenge for designers attuned to somaesthetic principles is that of 'engaging participants in deepening the experience of their own felt bodily sensations and movements *rather than external sensory interactions*'.[144]

By contrast, the undercommon mode of study Harney and Moten are concerned with rests precisely on the disturbance of any (literal) sense of disjunction between internal and external experience – what

140 Höök, *Designing with the Body*, 33.

141 Höök, *Designing with the Body*, 53.

142 Höök, *Designing with the Body*, 60.

143 Höök, *Designing with the Body*, 53.

144 Kristina Höök, Anna Ståhl, Martin Jonsson, Johanna Mercurio, Anna Karlsson, Eva-Carin Banka Johnson, 'Somaesthetic Design', *Interactions* 22, no. 4(2015): 27 (emphasis added).

Moten elsewhere calls an 'inappropriable ecstatics' of being 'taken out'.[145] It rests, that is to say, on 'the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you'.[146] While acknowledging that 'study is something that takes place in our bodies', thus sharing somaesthetics' core intuition, Harney goes on to clarify that undercommon study is 'also about not being too sovereign about the body; it's about touch and feel and breath as things that help to undo our notion of the sovereign boundaries of our bodies'.[147] In Harney and Moten's work, this anti-sovereign sensorial broadening, deepening, and circulation, this 'feel for feeling others feeling you', is given a specific name: *hapticality*, 'the touch of the undercommons'.[148] The 'feel we might call hapticality', Harney and Moten then explain in a particularly poetic passage, 'is modernity's insurgent feel, its inherited caress, [...] the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide'.[149] Arguably strengthening even further the convergence I have tried to sketch out throughout between undercommon study and Agamben's reformulation of use, Harney suggests that hapticality is akin to a 'profane exorcism' which 'saps the fever of individuation' in its most corporeal symptoms and manifestations.[150]

If practices of use were to be rearranged as profane experiments in hapticality, they could contribute to 'create a situation in which study can feel like ... the *tactile* sense of something going on'.[151] However, they would do so while also diverting us from a studious corporeality that encourages turning further inwards. Instead, a usely mode of study centred on the terms of hapticality would be one whereby 'touch makes the stakes of collectivity felt',[152] to put it

145 Moten, *In the Break*, 201.

146 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 98.

147 Harney, 'QMP25', min. 39:08.

148 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 98.

149 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 98.

150 Harney et al., 'Logistics Genealogies', 98.

151 Fred Moten and Wu Tsang, *Who Touched Me?* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance, 2016), 17 (emphasis added).

152 Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 192.

in Manning's terms: it would be a practice through which we can become ever more 'conscious of entanglement which is to say, to feel it'.[153]

COORDINATE 7 // ATTENTIONALITY

Somaestetics' emphasis on (self-)betterment raises not only philosophical but also, and very much relatedly, methodological questions. The latter is the case when considering how the design-led mode of study articulated by Höök proposes to zero in on the domain of the sensorial, as in what is brought into focus, what is pushed out of the frame, and the way this very selection process is understood to unfold. Höök and colleagues write that they 'searched for an alternative design stance that would *not distract us from our own experiences* but instead deepen our understanding and engagement with ourselves'.[154] This characterises the practice of studious awareness that somaesthetics seeks to foster squarely as a field of mastery, of control. That is to say, in somaesthetics as in other kindred modes of corporeal study, devoting attention is an act of will: it is what we put our minds and bodies to, by intentionally directing the focus of our scrutiny while clearing or blocking out whatever diverts us from it.

This is not the place for an extended engagement with the profusion of transdisciplinary debates dedicated to the topic of attention, not because unimportant (even though a recurrent preoccupation with the allegedly distracting power of digital technologies in the so-called attention economy can quickly get rather tedious), but because there is no way I can do justice to their sprawling complexity here.[155] Nevertheless, I do want to push back against

153 Moten and Tsang, *Who Touched Me?*, 17.

154 Höök et al., 'Somaesthetic Design', 27 (emphasis added).

155 For two critical studies on notions of attention and the attention economy, see for example Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

the commonplace account of attention somaesthetics subscribes to, so prominent in relation to studious practices, predicated upon an intuitive but misconceived categorical opposition between attention and distraction. Tim Ingold is again helpful here, as he suggests that a more appropriate distinction could and should instead be drawn between attention and intention. He proposes, somewhat against the grain of conventional wisdom, that whereas volitional *intentionality* is 'consciously directed by a subject, as if shining a spotlight on the world', *attentionality* is instead a practice grounded in 'participation in the environment' and that is thereby not antithetical to distraction but, in fact, relying on it. [156] According to Ingold, then, attention is something that is *demanded* of us as a prerequisite for participation, and distraction is the very form that that demand takes. Ingold gives the slightly hackneyed example of a hiker, whose attention is focussed and refocussed precisely by the distracting effect of continuous 'jolting and jarring caused by the body's engagement with uneven terrain'.[157] Similarly, there are very few things I find as joyously distracting as the melancholic singing of a bullfinch, which never fails to call for my attention in spite of my making every effort to concentrate on whatever task is at hand. This way, Ingold's perspective recasts attention as 'a practice of exposure': an opening or perhaps re-opening

Unsurprisingly, alongside this scholarship, the theme of attention is also central to a profusion of self-help-oriented, sometimes mindfulness-related books: I can only hope that readers will not lament a lack of specific references to this material. Several thought-provoking meditations on 'attention discourse', some of which make very similar points to the ones articulated here, can also be found in Michael (or L.M.) Sacasas' Substack newsletter and blog – e.g., see Sacasas, L.M., 'Your Attention Is Not a Resource', *The Convivial Society* 2, no.6 (April 2021), https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/your-attention-is-not-a-resource#details [Accessed 10th November 2023]; Sacasas, L.M., 'Spectrum of Attention', *The Frailest Thing Blog* (online), 3rd August 2018, https://thefrailestthing.com/2018/08/03/spectrum-of-attention/ [Accessed 10th November 2023].

156 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19.

157 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19.

to, rather than an incorporation of.[158] It recasts it, in the famous words of philosopher Simon Weil, as 'the rarest and purest form of generosity'.[159]

Let me return to undercommon study, and to use. Harney and Desideri contend that the undercommons 'is a place to invoke the conditions of *attention* together' and, by the very act of heeding such invocation of attentionality, to partake in a form of impersonal complicity. This is a studious, 'practical complicity'[160] because it compels us to collectively conspire against the terms of individuation that an intentional mode of attention is instead inevitably predicated upon.[161] That is to say: undercommon attentionality is an 'experiment conducted within and against ourselves, with and for others',[162] in that it is meant to make us feel both less *and* more than one at the same time. It is meant to make us feel, act, and live as other than one, as if always in the company of an *'accomplice'*.[163] Ingold strikingly echoes this formulation when clarifying that, contrary to the terms of intentionally-directed concentration, the mode of attentionality he is describing is 'not *of* but *with*'.[164] He writes:

> Where "*of*-ness" makes the other to which one attends into its object, and ticks it off, "*with*-ness" saves the other from objectification by bringing it alongside as an accomplice. It turns othering into togethering, interaction into correspondence.[165]

If interaction is the largely unquestioned currency of so many design practices, an attentional mode of studiously using could

158 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19.

159 Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1976), 462.

160 Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 54.

161 Harney and Desideri, 'A Conspiracy Without a Plot', 128.

162 Harney and Desideri, 'A Conspiracy Without a Plot', 126.

163 Harney and Desideri, 'A Conspiracy Without a Plot', 126. Also expressed in Italian as *'la complicità'*.

164 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19.

165 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19-20.

instead be reformulated as a peculiar form of correspondence. Attending, in the scene of use, is (co-)responding.

Again, the importance of referring to this haptic correspondence, to this distractedly attentional, undercommon complicity as "study" is to disabuse us of the idea that fending off individuation is something that is ever learnt or permanently achieved, as it were, rather than something that must be continuously rehearsed and revised together, precisely because it cannot be something that *one* independently is or becomes. It follows that, in the context of this book, attentional complicity might also be conceived as a practice of *lingering in use* and, thereby, of making use 'audible' by queering it, in Ahmed's terms: a way of staying 'attuned to the fleeting, to the flickering', listening to the materiality that we are otherwise 'supposed to pass over' according to a pointed, wilful, normative way of moving and sensing.[166] Interestingly, *Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective* (of which Harney and Moten are part) similarly suggest that it is exactly 'by paying attention to those conditions that are not meant to be attended to' that we can begin setting in motion a 'proper ab-use of the education system'.[167]

Now, attention or attentiveness is also a significant element in Lewis' Agambenian formulation of study. And while he still appears to set attention in sharp opposition to distraction along similar lines to the perspective contested above, (in this case, though, privileging the latter over the former),[168] Lewis also offers an exceptionally helpful way to illustrate the usely lingering I am gesturing towards through an analogy that should be particularly familiar to a design readership. He suggests that study – or studious play – in practice would be akin to a form of "tinkering": a type of informal and inherently improvisational material practice of 'dabbl[ing] in the minutiae of a particular object or problem', often hastily dismissed as amateurish, that is also discussed in Craig

166 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 198, 218, 208.

167 Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, 'Music and Economic Planning', 141.

168 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 42.

Martin's account of adhocism and designerly misuse mentioned in Chapter 2.[169] Lewis defines tinkering as a 'recursive, poetic, and highly experimental' practice marked by a peculiar temporality which sets it apart from other ostensibly open-ended yet instrumentally evaluative modes of acting. Modes which, I would add, are arguably staple design methods.[170] Lewis writes that the attentional studying of tinkerers entails

> a loss of definitive ends, uncertainty of outcomes, and the simultaneous rhythms of withdrawing and progressing. Rather than marching forward toward the evaluation of the test, tinkering suggests *a practice of being attentive to the activity* in and for itself, of finding pleasure in tinkering as a pure means. The end is no longer the priority so much as the experimentation … *Even if one tinkers in order to achieve a specific goal*, what is unique about tinkering is that its meandering and improvisational pace push toward a goal while also *delaying its eventual arrival*.[171]

Can we conceive not only of design experimentation but also of use, of a studious use, as a modality of social tinkering? If so, this might allow us to further distance it from purposeful, function-directed, individuating modes of use by conceptualising its attentionally meandering and improvisational pace as a way of 'making nothing out of something', as Moten so beautifully puts it.[172] Looking beyond design, Moten notes that the word study and the French *étude* are routinely adopted in visual arts and music respectively precisely to describe exploratory processes that, although sometimes informing and preparing for more formalised works to come, are similarly suspended in their tinkering-esque "preliminarity".[173] In this sense, we could perhaps understand a studious use as itself a preliminary social practice: one that is

169 Martin, *Deviant Design*, 97.

170 Lewis, *On Study*, 129.

171 Lewis, *On Study*, 128 (emphasis added).

172 Moten et al., 'Refusing Completion', 4.

173 Moten et al., 'Virtual Koerner's', 00:11:45.

'always pointed out towards itself' and that, as such, is not quite open-ended and not just 'incomplete', but indeed haptically revelling in its very incompletion.[174]

174 Moten et al., 'Virtual Koerner's', 00:12:04. I want to tentatively suggest here that what Marina Garcés, much like Moten, called practices of 'incompletion' or 'unfinishedness' [*inacabamiento*] are not quite open-ended in the way the IRS' work discussed in Chapter 2 is, for instance: whereas the latter invites multiple forms of completion, the former indicates being engaged in a process of permanent revision that can never be completed but rather only ever 'continued' [*ser continuado*]. See: Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 146-7.

5

A Studious Use

Not having relations of production with our world or between ourselves means never letting the search for results become more important than the attention to the process. [...] Communising a place means: setting its use free, and on the basis of this liberation experimenting with refined, intensified, and complexified relations.

Anonymous, Call / Appel, 2003: 68

Admittedly, as with any attempt to celebrate the processual emergence of social practices in written form, there is something about a textual interrogation of use that feels vaguely incongruous. At best, the resulting approximation is perhaps the literary equivalent of a skilful taxidermy job: a lifelike account that, despite its most earnest efforts, cannot help eviscerating the scene of use of the same kinaesthetic vitality it seeks to portray. And yet, if Chapters 3 and 4 have been dedicated to a recalibration of the paradigms of use and study, respectively, and worked toward the formulation of several conceptual coordinates, this chapter seeks to chart the exploration and extension of such coordinates throughout the orchestration of a collective event. This event I will here call, perhaps a little awkwardly, a *studiouse session*.

On the one hand, it could be said that the terms of studious use discussed up to this point are here quite literally set in motion, as it will soon become clear. On the other hand, however, the sequential arrangement of the chapters in this book should not be misinterpreted as mirroring the exploration's ostensibly linear procedural progression. Had that been the case, the studiouse session could be read as something like the *mise-en-scène* of an idea, either testing or displaying its validity, and effectively marking the interruption of a prior theoretical elaboration. But to the extent that something has been "put in play" in this study session, in the sense already conveyed by Moten in Chapter 2, this has been an instance of playing *with* ideas, not their playing *out*. That is to say, and as I will further

unpack below: the collective practice of use chronicled here below has neither simply preceded nor followed the studious intellectuality of theoretical articulation, but rather it shifted the focus onto a different yet complementary and – to a degree – concurrent register of experimentation. As I will discuss, several friends were somewhat formally invited to take part in an informal event revolving around the exploration of (and with) what I already described as a kinetic machine (on which more in due course), with the sole promise of spending a few hours together: talking, eating, drinking, moving, and of course using. Worth noting upfront is that this event was originally part of my doctoral research: although I want to think that the session has since overspilled its initial academic setting and that its written account can thus be rid for good of the requirement of being "assessable", of being valuable and therefore amenable to evaluation, it would be disingenuous to retroactively cover its tracks and conceal the many dilemmas and contradictions it admittedly came to be confronted with and indeed embody. Chapter 5 retraces the effort of thinking and working through some of the issues that arose in connection to this particular study session, which treaded a fine line between planning and improvisation in its open-ended engagement with 'the generality and mutuality of use'.[1]

The chapter begins with the attempt to confront the complexity of the hazy but dogged kinaesthetic intellectuality of an actual studiouse session, initially by drawing on the work of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi. Tapping into the ever-expanding collection of propositions formulated by the two philosopher-artists, primarily through their experience with the research-creation laboratory known as the *SenseLab* and its most recent offshoot, the *3Ecologies Institute*,[2] can help here to illustrate some of the hopes, challenges,

1 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 66.

2 The *SenseLab* was a Montreal-based research-creation project launched in 2004 by Erin Manning that, amongst other activities, hosted a number of experimental events through which a network of artists, academics, and activists sought to explore ways of intersecting fields such as philosophy, performance art, and event design. See: SenseLab, 'SenseLab | A Laboratory for Thought in Motion'. Since the *SenseLab's* official dissolution in 2021,

and intricacies that came to pass in the developments and curation of this studiouse session. To this conceptual analysis will follow a more grounded elaboration, proceeding by means of a set of caveats, clarifications, and examples of kindred practices with which the studiouse session shares some important traits.

The second half of this chapter will present something of a "report" of the study session, from initial planning all the way to its ostensible conclusion (thereby also underscoring its irreducibility to the sole moment of corporeal experimentation). If the report concentrates as much as possible on describing or narrating procedural aspects – i.e., *how* things happened, the process – this is to be understood not as a preposterous exercise in empirical objectivity but as a manner of deemphasising the neat conclusiveness of a hermeneutical appraisal – i.e., *what* happened, the outcome. The session has been here divided into seven "acts" for the sole sake of narrative expediency, since the confines of each act are, to be sure, anything but firm.

Part I: In the feel of each other[3]

INTERRUPTIVE COMMOTIONS AND ENABLING CONSTRAINTS

It has already been flagged up, both above and earlier on, that something knottier than the simple "playing out" of previously formulated theories on use and study is at stake here, in this study session. Indeed, it will hopefully be clear by now that grappling with tensions and assumed distinctions between conceptual and practical work – as well as with other related binary oppositions such as means/ends, form/content, process/outcome – is one of this book's leitmotifs. I

Manning and collaborators' efforts have been further focalised into the *3Ecologies Institute*, already launched in 2019. The 3E 'is an autonomous organization dedicated to participatory experimentation in research-creation' – see https://3ecologies.org/about.

3 Harney et al., 'Logistics Genealogies', 100.

would like to reflect below on some of the pragmatic implications of actually partaking in use and study outside of their individuating, proprietary logics by way of a set of interconnected concepts. How can we avoid an impulse to (self-)own in, as, and through the collective practices we engage in? How can we instead actively preserve, elaborate, and rehearse modes of mutually self-dispossessive haptic indebtedness?

I discussed in Chapter 2 how there seems to be a frequent tendency towards instrumental didacticism in the design of participatory experiments, whereby something has to be learnt, understood, decided, achieved, valued, produced that represents and stands in for the unified effort of participants. There is, in other words, *a common (end) point* to whatever collaborative process we have been involved in, an end to whatever mode of study has been going on. To be clear – and hopefully needless to say! – I am not trying to vilify targeted, purposeful, hopefully effective collective action, nor implying that something is fundamentally wrong with such an approach, far from it. However, if we are instead in the pursuit of that shared, tinkering suspension of intentionality, of that 'disavowal of the very idea of an endpoint'[4] which I proposed to characterise a studious use, what practical measures could and should be taken?

For a start, we might want to devise ways of retaining the entanglement and sharedness at the heart of study and use, while keeping at bay its crystallisation into "deliverables" as well as conclusive phenomenological interpretations of its unfolding. Manning and Massumi's experiments with the SenseLab are illuminating in this regard, as the two have sought to hold in generative tension seemingly antithetical concepts such as curation and improvisation in a way that treats these instead as mutually *in*clusive.[5] Their idiosyncratic take on choreographic work can begin to offer a helpful way of articulating this. Intuitively, on the one hand, conceiving of studious use as involving some type of choreography can perhaps serve to

4 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 227.

5 See: Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 105.

foreground the corporeal dimension of study, as a 'complex ecology of incipient movement', paying heed to this extralinguistic register of intelligibility in a way that does not subordinate or reduces what is made *felt* in study to rationalisation and assessment.[6] On the other hand, a potentially deceptive term, choreography might be more conventionally associated with forms of premeditated processual ordering, perhaps even of behavioural discipline – that is, with '*graphē*' (writing) intended as a sets of given instructions or indeed a script, in keeping with Akrich's terminology addressed in Chapter 3, regulating a meticulous logistics of bodies in motion. Yet, what Manning and Massumi have in mind is a type of choreographic work that consists in the deliberate curation of material conditions for the collective *entrance* into an event. A curatorial effort which, they claim, is not prescriptive since it is seeking neither to manage nor to normatively mould experience. How so? 'Choreography at its best', Manning contends, 'is not about aligning bodies to precomposed shapes'.[7] Rather, she goes on to explain, the choreographic techniques that the SenseLab has been interested in are intended to 'create the conditions for the opening of a field of experience to a different way of functioning'.[8] Of course, the keyword here is once again "opening", much like in Agamben's discussion of profanation. Indeed, as Massumi proposes, 'relational techniques'[9] underpinned by this choreographic mode of operating

> can be practiced to modulate unfolding events ... and have the potential of reorienting tendencies towards different ends, without predesignating exactly what they are. [...] *Tendencies are oriented, but open-ended*.[10]

Choreography thus operates here as a spark igniting an interplay (or, better still, an *intra*play), entirely preoccupied with

6 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 122. Also see Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 15

7 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 122.

8 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 125.

9 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 50-1, 97.

10 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 97 (emphasis added).

orchestrating a way *into* a studiouse session rather than with the way out of it – as in the *out*come or the event's effect.[11]

If not commonality of purpose and unified outcomes, what makes a studiouse session a shared event rather than merely a loose collection of individuals that just so happen to be gathered in the same space? A second helpful term that I want to turn to here, dotted throughout much of Manning and Massumi's writings, is *attunement*. This is a concept that the two authors borrow from psychologist Daniel Stern and which, if taken at face value, might appear just as ambivalent as their use of the term choreographic. And yet, it is perhaps the key through which curatorial modulation and improvisational open-endedness can be generatively held in tension. Initially, this term might be intuitively associated with ideas of consensus and homogenisation that are again clearly redolent of comportment policing. Attunement as in tuning one *to* the other, or tuning divergence *to* a unitary harmony: a stabilisation or adjustment of sorts, which in Massumi's words is meant to 'subsume the singularity of the contributing actions that come into relation, even as it brings them together to joint effect'.[12] This mode of attunement would be one which mirrors what discussed in Chapter 1: the normative and even authoritarian impulse permeating conceptions of community as fusion and conformity, on the one hand, and the contract-driven, legalistic, perhaps opportunistic cohesion holding together the antisocial fiction that is a civil society of separate individuals, on the other hand. However, the attunement that Manning and Massumi speak about is of a very different kind. Or, better still, of a *differential* kind: a 'differential attunement' that is concerned with synchrony rather than symmetry.[13]

Massumi explains that the concept of differential attunement indicates a process that 'finds difference in unison, and concertation in difference'.[14] If there is any "sameness" in this mode of

11 See: Manning, *Pragmatics of the Useless*, 60.

12 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 118.

13 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 95.

14 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 56.

attunement, then, it refers not to a homogenised outcome, but to the event itself in its procedural unfolding: 'affective difference in the same event', differentiated effects or lines of flight (as Deleuze might call them) emerging from a shared process.[15] This means that, through differential attunement, the kaleidoscopic heterogeneity proper of a collective situation is not diminished, flattened, or even altogether cast aside, but rather 'indexed to the same cut, primed to the same cue, shocked in concert'.[16] Massumi continues, and it is here worth quoting in full:

> What happens is a collective event. It's distributed across those bodies. Since each body will carry a different set of tendencies and capacities, there is no guarantee that they will act in unison even if they are cued in concert. However different their eventual actions, all will have unfolded from the same suspense. *They will have been attuned – differentially – to the same interruptive commotion*.[17]

(For the sake of conceptual and terminological consistency here and throughout, I should note that I understand the 'different set of tendencies and capacities' that Massumi describes as being carried by "each body" to be by no means based *in* or properties *of* individuals but, rather, as tendencies and capacities whose very differentiation implicitly refers to their immediately social dimension).

It is important to clarify here that with terms like commotion and shock Massumi does not intend to express a traumatic process or event. Rather, what he is referring to is a 'microshock': a 'momentary cut' galvanising a new field of 'microperception'.[18] Moreover, what he calls microshocks are not out of the ordinary events. In fact, he further proposes by drawing on pioneering pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, these are perceptual disturbances that often even 'pass unnoticed' in their ordinary pervasiveness but which are

15 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 56.

16 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 55.

17 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 55-6 (emphasis added).

18 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 53.

actually ubiquitous.[19] Massumi contends that such interruptions could be as subtle as a simple 'change in focus, or a rustle at the periphery of vision that draws the gaze towards it'.[20] Deliberately choreographing this type of commotion therefore involves 'modulating a situation in a way that amplifies a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility' and is a process very much engaged in the same practice of attentionality already described by way of Ingold.[21] 'In every shift of attention', Massumi indeed continues, 'there is an interruption' of 'whatever continuities are in progress',[22] derailing us from our directed forward progression on supposedly siloed experiential tracks. Such an interruption re-immerses us instead into the sensorial midst of social life: *"com-motion"* as in a call to shared motion. Prompting us to act, move, sense attentionally, the choreographing of microshocks is thus a form of kinaesthetic 'abduction'[23] whereby, as Massumi notes, '"Attunement" refers to the direct capture of attention and energies *by the event*', rather than to the result of a sovereign (even if collective) act of will.[24] Consequently, the way such interruptive commotions are 'snapping us to attention together' is not akin to a call to order, nor does it quash the inherent heterogeneity given by the fact that 'we each are taken into the event from a different angle, and move out of it following our own singular trajectories'.[25] Much like in Ingold's discussion of correspondence, any coordination potentially resulting from such commotions is not of (i.e., management and leadership) but with (i.e., Harney and Desideri's *complicità*). We could say that this choreographic effort amounts to the creation of shared distractions, as Ingold puts it: conditions through which we might get

19 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 53.

20 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 53.

21 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 58.

22 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 53.

23 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 10.

24 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 115 (emphasis added).

25 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 115.

'captivated, pulled in one direction or another', our attention seized by the ongoing, emergent collectivity of a situation.[26]

Human geographer Leila Dawney, writing about affect and 'the somatisation of politics', similarly emphasised the importance of microperceptual interruptions as 'a corporeal moment ... that halts and disrupts the flow of experience'.[27] Dawney claims that, when amplified to the point of perceptibility – or, perhaps, of operational intelligibility – experiential interruptions can be deployed as analytic lenses through which oscillations between individual subjectivation and 'the sociality of affect' can be detected, critically observed, and – I would add – studied.[28] Interestingly, she suggests that attending to this form of intensified somatic interruption, by way of 'focusing on the event of body/subject being out of synch' and thereby being confronted with the social life out of which subjectivity *appears* to emerge, 'can be thought of as a limit practice insofar as it operates to "wrench the subject from itself"', explicitly referring here to the Foucauldian "*se déprendre de soi-même*" already mentioned in Chapter 3.[29] Generating and studying (in) collective, self-dispossessive experiential interruptions, kinaesthetic disturbances, mutual interferences, Dawney concludes, 'can be used as a way of making present the workings of power in the production of the subject, through the *use of one's own body and that of others as indicators*'.[30]

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26 Ingold, 'On Human Correspondence', 19.

27 Leila Dawney, 'The Interruption: Investigating Subjectivation and Affect', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31, no. 4 (1 August 2013): 628.

28 Dawney, 'The Interruption', 631.

29 Dawney, 'The Interruption', 635.

30 Dawney, 'The Interruption', 641 (emphasis added). While here is not the place to properly unpack this, much could be said about the counterlogistical approach of this interruptive practice. Attempting a sabotage of sorts, the latter seeks to grapple with the way logistical capitalism does not simply rely on governance *over* movement, but rather consists in the exercise of governance *through* movement – i.e., the turning of movement and mobility itself into an instrument of governance. Also see: Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 92; André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Jasper Bernes, 'Logistics, counterlogistics and the communist prospect', *Endnotes* 3 (September 2013): 172-201;

Admittedly, all of this begs a number of questions: Why making such a curatorial effort in differential attunement, rather than simply leaving full scope for improvisational openness? Is it really necessary to choreograph corporeal conditions of entrance into a collective event? Why interfering with or even obstructing people's already ongoing capacity for spontaneous and creative improvisation? Manning and Massumi's response to these entirely valid concerns primarily hinges on the claim that 'in and of itself openness does not create the conditions for collaborative exploration'.[31] Which is to say that, in their attempt to create the conditions for an opening *in* and *of* practice, 'to set certain conditions in place allowing for an inventive interaction to occur',[32] Manning and Massumi nevertheless strive to reject an understanding of improvisation as mere anything-goes. Indeed, Massumi shrewdly remarks that 'if anything goes, nothing will come'.[33] Self-evident as it may sound, this is a precious piece of advice for designers who, perhaps in reaction to the crass behavioural engineering characterising early strands of User-Centred Design and Human Computer Interaction, might have found themselves paralysed by fear that *any* restriction is inevitably authoritarian, as if constraints were to automatically chain those in the scene of use to normative roles and preclude free access. However, contrary to what the neoliberal/libertarian individuating ideologies already discussed in Chapter 1 tell us, Massumi notes that 'freedom always arises from

Charmaine Chua, 'Logistics, Capitalist Circulation, Chokepoints', *The Disorder Of Things*, 9 September 2014; Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); but also the chapter *Power is Logistic. Block Everything!* in Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 81-98.

31 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 94.

32 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 175.

33 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 175. This perspective is perhaps aligned to Harney and Moten's already mentioned suggestion that 'elaboration' and 'a kind of rehearsal' are still needed in order to deepen and circulate the mutual indebtedness of study, even though we are potentially always already immersed in that same studious mutual indebtedness from the start. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 156.

constraint – it's a creative conversion of it'.[34] This, I want to argue, is the case with use too, if only we allow ourselves to step outside of a logic of user-friendliness and, with Ahmed, 'consider use not only as the potential to increase capacity [i.e., to improve] but as contact and friction', as 'things rubbing up against each other'.[35] Rather than pursuing 'an escape into an aesthetic field of free choice and unfettered expression', so as to retreat and conveniently take shelter into an 'unconstrained environment',[36] Manning and Massumi instead wish to make a case for a form of 'structured improvisation'.[37] What they mean here is that, if improvisation is to unfold as a process that is genuinely collective through and through, rather than as a private and individuating exercise, if we are to engage in a polyrhythmic sociality[38] – or, in keeping with Ingold, in a mode of correspondence – 'in the course of which something unexpected might emerge',[39] this improvisation may be generatively instigated by and through a shared experimentation with *enabling constraints*.

In Massumi's terms, crafting enabling constraints thus consists in developing 'poetico-procedural'[40] mechanisms of interference to be then embedded into a collective event. Rather than outright hinderances or rules, and in line with the type of choreographic work described above, these constraints are enabling in that they are meant to modulate and provide a shared scaffolding for a field of collective action, to poetically inspire and operationally render possible certain modes of motion in ways that are not rigidly framed, prescriptive, pre-scripted.[41] Returning to what I proposed in Chapter

34 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 39.

35 Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 226, 41.

36 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 39.

37 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 175.

38 Or a 'polyrhythmic coming-differently together through the same event'. See: Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 119.

39 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 175.

40 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 175.

41 'The role of the techniques of relation would not be to "frame" the interaction'. Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 92.

2, this is a mode of infrastructuring sociality, not of structuring it. In other words, enabling constraints are supposed to be

> sets of *designed* constraints that are meant to create specific conditions for creative interaction where something is set to happen, but there is no pre-conceived notion of exactly what the outcome will be or should be. No deliverable. All process.[42]

The studiouse session chronicled in this chapter has much to owe to Manning and Massumi's approach to the curation of collective events quickly reviewed here: a set of enabling constraints were designed and embedded into the session in order to afford not behavioural discipline, conformity, or consensus, but rather the material conditions of access into a collective moment of infrastructured improvisation with shared practices of use, to which participants attuned together, attentionally yet differentially.

KINETIC MACHINE

In the specific case of *this* studiouse session, a number of enabling constraints contributed to "modulating the unfolding of the event", in keeping with Massumi's phrasing – some intended, some imposed by incipient circumstances. Although these will mainly be discussed later in the chapter, amongst the constraints that were deliberately choreographed I believe one needs special consideration here: what I have been referring to as a *kinetic machine [Fig.15]*. Indeed, if only because of its prominent material presence and immediately obvious relation to the scene of use, this machine arguably represents the principal enabling constraint that was expressly designed and embedded into this study session.

At its most schematic, this is a contraption composed of three elements: two "satellites" and a "node". Each of the two satellites consists of a wooden panel mounted onto a steel pole, which is itself part and vertical axis of a rotating mechanism. The mechanism in

42 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 73 (emphasis added).

turn sits on a platform resting on a set of four springs housed within a chassis of sorts. Each satellite's rotating mechanism includes a standard bike gear, onto which is mounted a bike chain that links it to the node. The node is composed of a steel pole, bolted onto a chassis identical to those of the satellites, and which serves as the vertical rotating axis for a set of two gears that engage with the two bike chains and thus connect the three elements together. This way, the motion produced through the rotation of either of the satellites will transfer the same motion to the other via the mediating transmission of the node. Particularly though certainly not exclusively readers who are even marginally familiar with bicycles will of course appreciate how mounting gears of varying sizes would alter the transmission of motion – something that was not attempted in this case, but which I think would be very much worth exploring, together with a more complex configuration that would include multiple satellites and, potentially, multiple nodes too.

Fig. 15: *Kinetic Machine*, 2018

Importantly – and this is perhaps *the* key feature of this machine – the rotating mechanisms on both satellites also comprise

a "lock system" *[Fig.16]:* unless the top panels (and therefore, with them, the rotating mechanisms too) are compressed and pushed downward, for example by the weight of a body, the rotating mechanisms engage with dowels in the chassis and therefore rotation is impeded. Because, as noted above, the two satellites are connected via the node and so is their motion, this means that the whole machine will be locked and no rotation will be possible unless *both* satellites are compressed – that is to say, unless they are both somehow partaking *in use [Fig.17]*. Ahmed's remark that sometimes 'a body can be a key' in the scene of use feels strikingly apt here.[43]

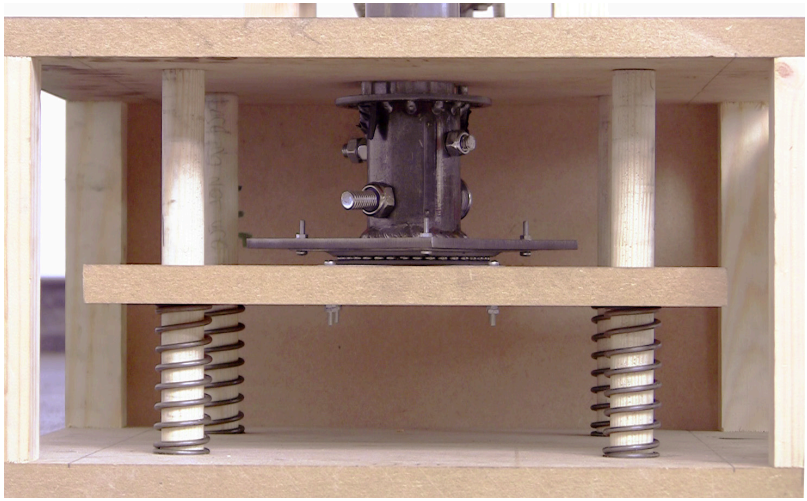

Fig. 16: *Kinetic Machine "lock system"*, 2018

Now, on the one hand, the construction of the machine attempted to materialise and give tangible substance to the coordinates that were concurrently being explored throughout the re-articulation of use presented in Chapter 3, by deliberately endowing the machine with certain affordances. Take, for example, the general appearance of the satellites: if this quite explicitly references or conforms to a familiar visual language – according to which certain

43 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 60.

archetypal features are here likely to suggest "pivoting stool" – it is because such a language is not abandoned *per se*. That is to say, to put it in Agambenian terms: the possible "rite" of sitting, which certain material cues might invite, is not merely abolished but rather profaned, its sacred postural norms and objectives neglected. A profanation that is here technically made possible, hence not exactly in-scripted, through the introduction of elements of distraction (the rotation mechanism) into the object around which the rite revolves. Through this alteration, the artefact can thus be opened to a new use, liberated through an interruption or suspension of its economy. Moreover, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the node allowed for a displacement of the site of motional interference, if only in an aesthetically pedestrian fashion, locating it not *on* the satellites – hence not belonging to them, as it were – but within an inappropriable between given by the three elements together. This middle-made-tangible thus mediates an action with no clearly identifiable authorship – blurring the threshold between action and passion, effecting and affected, moving and being moved.

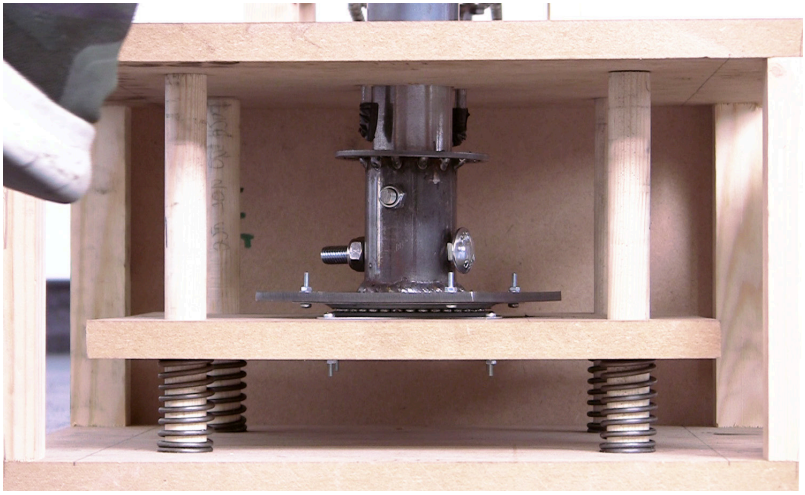

Fig. 17: *Kinetic Machine "lock system" in use*, 2018

On the other hand, once again and possibly running the risk of labouring the point, this making process has not been a simple manner of applying theory, for it actively contributed to the shaping of the conceptual architecture from which it also emerged (again, affected but also effecting), by means of a kind of post-rationalisation. While sometimes dismissed as disingenuous retroactive attribution of purpose – when relating to an artistic or designerly processes at least – here post-rationalisation instead guided the theoretical formulation in important directions. A case in point would be the design of the lock system: the two-phase operation of this lock – together with the spring compression allowing the slight downward motion of the satellites underneath an imposed weight – essentially seemed to haptically dramatize, to amplify to the point of perceptibility, a peculiar kinaesthetic manner of giving way by means of entrance into a field of interference. In other words, the unlocking of the lock signals the passing of a threshold: a corporeal "consent not to be a single being", perhaps. This mode of "consent" was *subsequently* explored in theoretical terms through Harney and Moten's concept of hapticality discussed in the previous chapter.[44] The kinetic machine was embedded in the collective event as an enabling constraint, with the attempt to experiment with and study *in* a clumsy, collective dance of use. Which is to say: to directly immerse in a mutually (if asymmetric)[45] self-dispossessive feel of motional interference and coimplication, magnified to the point of operational intelligibility, that *meanwhile* was being theoretically elaborated largely through Agamben's work and then further refined mostly by thinking with Harney and Moten. As already anticipated, then, this should not lead to the understandable assumption that activation followed theory, as some kind of verification of what only conceptually articulated up until then – more on this in the next section.

44 Again, no structural arrangement of this book could appropriately render this peculiar interplay of registers.

45 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

One last anecdotal observation is worth relaying here, before venturing any further, regarding the construction of the machine. Upon completion of the making process – which was carried out with the help in different capacities of several people, in equal measure skilled and generous – and as the time came for the rotating and locking mechanisms to be tried out, it dawned on me that not even this phase could be undertaken individually. That is to say that, beyond any conscious intention, both the mechanism embedded in the kinetic machine just built and the mode of reciprocal motion that this was meant to explore had no way of even being experienced in any concrete corporeal sense without a concertedly collective effort. Any "operating" of the machine was in fact entirely dependent on a moment of sociality. This apparently banal and, in hindsight, perhaps even obvious realisation speaks to what Craig Martin describes as the 'immanent collaboration' at the heart of much designing, 'beyond platitudes around co-design'.[46] Moreover, though, it also seemed to materially signal a certain folding together of this project's pragmatic exploration and its subject matter, so to speak, with the latter suddenly being given substance, made tangible or, in the words of human geographer Derek McCormack, 'rendered palpable'.[47] Indeed, all moments that have fed into *A Studious Use* – including all phases of the study session reported below – could be seen as various expressions or, better still, *instantiations* of the self-dispossessive sociality that this whole book is seeking to attend to. In other words, this work has not been solely *about* self-dispossessed sociality but is also *itself* a series of experiments in self-dispossession, for all moments of this projects have necessitated and welcomed – each in its own particular way – forms of interference, contamination, deformation, conviviality, exposure, coimplication.

46 Martin, *Deviant Design*, 29.

47 Derek P. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), ix. I am here also inspired by a passage of the same anonymous "Call" that opens this chapter (and discussed later on): 'To get organised means: to give substance to a situation. Making it real, tangible' – see: Anonymous, 'Call / Appel', 9.

CAVEATS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Having examined the complex relationship between the making of a machine and the making of conceptual propositions, I would like to consider the making of the studiouse session itself. A number of criticalities regarding the nature of this session have already been flagged up here and there, which I now wish to unpack more properly. Indeed, because of its proximity – whether actual or only apparent – to other modes of designing and usely experimentation that involve participatory corporeal activities and engagement with artefacts, the studiouse session could easily be misconstrued. To this end, in this section I will articulate a few caveats and clarifications aimed at better defining the collective practice of studying with and in use that this book is concerned with.

As a matter of utmost priority, and as already anticipated, I should specify that this studiouse session is not a way of proving or supporting a distinct argument or hypothesis. It neither claims nor wishes to represent a solution to a problem, and it is decidedly not an answer to a question, but rather a way of exploring, addressing, lingering on, and ultimately *studying* that question – i.e., sociality – not least because, as stated in the very first lines of this book, the "problem" at hand is not one that can or even ought to be resolved. As a result, the session is neither strictly *generative* in a productivist sense, as in producing data for an ethnographic study or an iterative usability appraisal, nor *illustrative*, as a case study or "grand finale" of sorts, but rather *emergent*, as involving the specificity and dynamism of unfolding eventfulness. A brief review of what sets a studiouse session apart from generative or illustrative approaches might be helpful here.

a. On the one hand, that the studiouse session is not supposed to be a generative practice here means that the session is not intended to yield evidence – whether quantitative or qualitative, whether for me or for anyone else – about how different types of users across various demographics interact with the

kinetic machine. The session, for example, is not concerned with users' identities or subjectivities, with seeking to detect and map out diversities in terms of reactions and responses according to defined groups (e.g., age, race and ethnicity, class, gender, dis/ability, etc.) or, more generally, according to different social circumstances and interests – nor, for that matter, does it pursue the achievement on the part of those involved of some sort of mutual *understanding*. This is categorically not to flatten experience by ignoring or downplaying the very real significance of such specificities in daily life, but because the focus here is entirely on exploring a shared *process,* rather than on ethnographic observation and phenomenological interpretation of the unfolding action and its effects. That is, the focus is not on *what* this session means but squarely on *how* it *might* come to mean anything at all.

b. Equally, on the other hand, this session is not conceived as a way of gathering and extracting insight that will then feed into either the direct refinement of the machine or a further (design) stage of some kind – as was the case with the Cultural Probes discussed in Chapter 2. The event is not meant to ultimately bring about a bettered version of the machine because *the machine itself is not the primary focus* of the action, but only one of the many elements at play. Which is not to say that infrastructural arrangements and material affordances are irrelevant to the unfolding of the session (quite the contrary!), but that their iterative improvement, whatever that would mean in this context, is not at all of interest here. Of course, many variations of this machine are possible and have indeed been considered, sketched out, discussed, or even just imagined for future experiments. However, the choice of the one embedded in *this* studiouse session is to be solely attributed to restrictions of time and resources, rather than to an expectation of its exceptional suitability. Some of these restrictions will be further explored in due course. Likewise, and perhaps needless to say, the personal improvement of participants is

also entirely beside the point. The studiouse session is not generative in the way a workshop is, in the sense that whether or not anything is learned in the process is incidental. Perhaps not unlike with Joseph Beuys' so-called social sculptures, what matters throughout this activity is not the "made" in and of itself but, rather, 'the kinds of relations and connections animated and made possible by it'.[48] Importantly, however, because the focus here is not – once again – on deliverables and output, whether or not new "publics" are brought into being by a 'new set of relations' resulting from this activity is similarly not of much significance.[49]

c. Taking seriously this book's avowed commitment to the incipient liveliness of social practice means that the session does not quite function as a case study either, in that it is not 'presenting [a] singularity as a particular instance of a general rule or theory'.[50] Sure, I just devoted two entire chapters to formulating what I awkwardly called "coordinates"; sure, I am trying to grapple with and sketch out certain choreographic principles or terms of study to work with...But none of this is in the attempt of identifying and proposing something like a new design canon, a blueprint, a framework, or a model of practice for which this particular studiouse session stands in as a paradigmatic illustration. This aspect cannot be emphasised enough.

d. Moreover, as already explained, this session is not a simple physical representation of concepts, intended as a "ta-da!" moment denoting the conclusion and actualisation of prior intellectual elaboration and *embodying* its outcome. It is therefore not to be confused with a form of applied theory, with the dramatized staging of a thought experiment, nor with an

48 Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines*, 27.

49 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 106.

50 McCormack, *Refrains*, 12.

> authored fictional scenario à la Dunne and Raby, for instance. Quite the contrary, it is in fact an opening for further study, albeit in a collective, corporeal, undercommon way. This is to say that what is going on here, as human geographer Derek McCormack writes, 'is not a question of proof, but more a question of potential': it is a moment not of showing what we have learned or gained by doing this or that, but rather of asking "how does it *feel* to do things this way together?".[51]

Finally, all the above also points to the fact that this studiouse session is not quite a "work-in-progress" either. For not only it is tentative and incomplete, but this very tentative incompleteness is here embraced, in the effort to indefinitely suspend and reject any sense of advancement towards the eventual achievement of results, towards credit, which the logic of progress inevitably implies. Perhaps, then, we could suggest that this session, because of its vaguely quixotic repudiation of compulsive productivism, is instead a form of what some shrewd comrades once described as a "shirk-in-recess":[52] an inoperative activity, deliberately eschewing formal conclusion and remaining momentarily suspended (perhaps even lost) in a tinkering process with no discernible target on its horizon.

To be clear, these caveats notwithstanding, I am not suggesting that nothing at all *is* or *was* produced by way of this studiouse session. It would be at best naïve and at worst disingenuous to ignore the fact that, in the very act of visually recording or even just narrating certain moments in this book, some kind of "content" is being produced, curated, archived, extracted. Still, my claim is that the practices of sociality at stake here are not *for* anything in particular – for something to come – other than themselves: they do not require additional legitimacy and valorisation outside or beyond

51 McCormack, *Refrains*, 13.

52 I am indebted for the use of this term to the wits and wayward inventiveness of friends and recurrent interlocutors Megan Archer, Lars Cornelissen, and Joel Roberts.

their very unfolding. They are of interest, and hopefully not just to me, not because of their specific purposes or even effects, whichever these might happen to be, but simply because partaking in a process of 'patient experimentation', centring on usely study and studious using, that immediately instantiates, prefigures, makes felt and operatively intelligible a collective, haptic cultivation of indebted attentionality.[53] In Shukaitis' words, then, it could be said that this studiouse session is 'a process that is not necessarily predicated upon the creation of meaning, but as an intervention or opening into a system of relations'.[54] Put differently, perhaps the studiouse session upholds a spirit of 'modest experimental empiricism'[55] whereby, as Colectivo Situaciones write, 'intensity does not lie so much in that which is produced (that which is communicable) as in the process of production itself (that which is lost in communication)'.[56] How? By refusing as much as possible to provide an explanation that would render neatly legible and even codify specific arising gestures, affects, complicities.

Peering beyond all these "not", perhaps a constructive and more affirmative approach to define what the studiouse session *is* (or at least tries to be) might be to look at a few examples of kindred practices, to which I turn below.

SOME RESONANCES

Clearly, much of what I have been outlining in this chapter is far from uncharted territory. In fact, whether explicitly or implicitly, and some important differences notwithstanding, glimpses of the same themes

53 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 13.

54 Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines*, 116.

55 McCormack, *Refrains*, ix.

56 Colectivo Situaciones, 'Something More on Research Militancy: Footnotes on Procedures and (In)Decisions' (2004), in Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization, ed. Stevphen Shukaitis, David Graeber, and Erika Biddle, trans. Sebastian Touza and Nate Holdren (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), 81.

and tactics discussed here can already be seen across examples of practice cited earlier on. Take the IRS's *ProbeTools*, encountered in Chapter 2: if re-read through the lens of Manning and Massumi's formulations, could these not be understood as some sort of enabling constraint, as playful material disturbances designed and embedded into a real situation in the hope that the interference they produce might open up new processes and dialogues? Likewise, situationist practices discussed in Chapter 3 such as *dérives* and *détournement* can arguably furnish a relevant historical point of reference for the type of 'organised spontaneity' that this session wishes to choreograph.[57] Indeed, perhaps not unlike the deliberate introduction of a kinetic machine within a social event, through a 'combination of chance and planning'[58] the SI sought to alter facets of the 'material environment of life and the behaviours which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it'.[59] More broadly speaking, many of the ideas and processes presented above resonate with disparate efforts, both pragmatic and theoretical, both past and present, which I have been hoping to weave together, sample, mix, and compose with. With that in mind, this section will briefly acknowledge some ways in which the question of sociality in its corporeal dimension has been addressed in similar terms, as a terrain of study and experimentation, *outside* of design discourses and practices. I will pay particular attention to the world of participatory and performance art, including forms of theatre, installation-based work, and experimental dance, obviously without any pretence of providing an extensive overview but rather in a spirit of (un)disciplinary curiosity. To comprehensively assess these kindred activities and conceptualisations and engage in any great detail with the incredibly vast body of literature related to each of them clearly exceeds the limited scope of this book. Yet, the examples that follow cannot remain entirely unmentioned, if anything because it is precisely a more concerted attuning to some of these and

57 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 78.

58 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 78.

59 Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations', 2006, 38.

surrounding debates that might propel future modes of studious use. Some of the work included below has directly inspired this studiouse session or, at times, incited a reaction in opposition to it. In other cases, similar traits have been recognised at some point along the way, just as we recognise a shared direction (not a destination!) or familiar gait in fellow travellers. In yet other instances, a bit of both has occurred. Such is the case of the (sadly) short-lived, London-based collective *nanopolitics group* (NG), whose experiments and writings were having a tremendous impact on the studiouse session's development at the time when this activity was being conceived, back in 2018, in the midst of my doctoral studies.

Nanopolitics, as articulated by the homonymous group, is not a monolithic doctrine or a set of procedures. Rather, it is a practical sensibility, expressed through a multiplicity of relational methods and committed to approaching politics as a 'playing field': something that engages us on a corporeal level and with which we can engage in concrete and inventive ways.[60] The practice of nanopolitics draws on a variety of traditions, techniques, games, rituals, and physical exercises in the effort to collectivise 'bodily attentiveness'.[61] Explicit influences range from the pedagogic-therapeutic experiments of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, through Roberto Freire's *Soma*, to forms of technoshamanism. However, nanopolitics often also involves much more mundane, even 'whimsical'[62] activities, such as 'workshops, dinners, drifts, demonstrations, flashmobs, discussions; walking with eyes closed, sitting on each other's heads, singing; and so forth'.[63] All of these come to converge into what the NG describe as 'a practice of sensibilities, an *experiment in living politics from, with and through the body*'.[64]

60 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, ed. Paolo Plotegher, Manuela Zechner, and Bue Rübner Hansen (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 11.

61 Nanopolitics Group, 'Nanopolitics: A First Outline of Our Experiments in Movement', Lateral 1, no. 1 (May 2012).

62 Nanopolitics Group, 'A First Outline'.

63 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 25.

64 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 19.

Particularly within the context of this book, the very term "nanopolitics" no doubt begs several questions, perhaps the most important of which is: what is the "nano" prefix intended to express here? Contrary to what one might assume, the nano in nanopolitics does not exactly indicate a separate *sphere* within political life, a dimension somewhat even smaller than a micropolitical one. Which also means that nanopolitics is not pursuing something of a retreat, perhaps receding even further inward than "the personal", encouraging yet more private navel gazing, hence taking us one step further towards self-possessed individuation. Rather, being 'different yet complementary to the "micro" and the "macro"', nanopolitics seeks to shift the attention from a concern with scale to one of '*registers of perception*'.[65] That is to say: just as 'In common parlance the prefix "nano" is used to indicate something ... beyond what the eye can perceive', this 'politico-corporeal investigation into the social' brings to the fore what is 'felt rather than seen' in social life. [66] The NG write:

> With "nano" we talk about how what occurs at the level of the group, the world, the institution or the social comes to exist under our skin, in our guts, through our voice, in our touch and in the ways we feel.[67]

In nanopolitical practice, the sensing flesh is therefore not only abstractedly addressed – invoked, scrutinised, theorised, upheld, assumed, yet often all too insubstantial – but also activated, *mobilised* (as in literally "made to move") as a field of collective experimentation that would 'not deny or simplify experience'.[68] Indeed, nanopolitical exercises primarily hinge on 'finding new axes of joint movement'.[69] As the NG clarify,

65 Nanopolitics Group, 'A First Outline' (emphasis added).

66 Nanopolitics Group, 'A First Outline'.

67 Nanopolitics Group, 'A First Outline'.

68 Nanopolitics Group, 'A First Outline'.

69 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 14.

> When we say nanopolitics concerns movement, we mean movement quite concretely, as the movement of individual and collective bodies, of our tissues and fluids, our skins, bones and so forth.[70]

One aspect that, however, remained largely under-explored in the NG's work, and which could spawn further nanopolitical experimentation, is a closer, direct, and robust engagement (both conceptual and pragmatic) with the notion of *use*. Despite one of the central methodological questions that appear to have arisen from nanopolitical sessions being '*[w]hat ethics and politics of "use" may we come up with in working across grassroots and copyrighted methods?*', the category of use was never fully thematised as such in the scant writings of the NG, beyond some passing nods to its theoretical significance.[71]

Let me shift gear now, perhaps a bit abruptly, while however keeping in focus collective participation and movement. In her important book *Artificial Hells* (2012), Claire Bishop produced a piercing appraisal of contemporary participatory art, discussing its politics and ambiguous disciplinary boundaries, and tracing its historical background. Bishop described the type of participatory art covered in her book as comprising those "creative" activities wherein

> the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a "viewer" or "beholder", is now repositioned as co-producer or *participant*.[72]

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70 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 22.

71 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 12, 138. Paolo Plotegher, one of the NG's core members, indirectly acknowledges the notion of "use" elsewhere when he writes: 'Art can be something unsettling; also, it can be something we can *use* rather than just contemplate. Pleasurable or painful, art affects us, and this affective power is something we can make use of'. See: Plotegher, 'What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?', 18.

72 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

This schematic definition should already suffice to identify some shared ground between the studiouse session and the kind of participatory projects Bishop writes about (in part unfavourably, it bears saying) – most notably, the intention to 'emphasise process over a definitive image, concept or object' (i.e. an outcome), so as to concentrate on 'what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy'.[73] Bishop then contends that an important precedent for this type of art is represented by the so-called *Happenings*, to which I want to turn briefly.

The technical term "Happening" described a radicalised form of theatre, mainly inspired by the improvisational work of John Cage and others, elaborated by an international host of artists since the 1950s, and poised to become a point of reference for many subsequent artistic endeavours. Initially theorised and staged by American artist Allan Kaprow, Happenings were theatrical events that, as Bishop writes, 'deliberately rejected plot, character, narrative structure and the audience/performer division'.[74] Happenings indeed hinged on the artists' direct engagement with the audience throughout a series of loosely scored scenes, inviting and indeed inciting spontaneous reactions from all those present during the performance. More drastically still, Jonathan Crary notes that Kaprow soon grew frustrated with the tired artistic convention stipulating the very existence of an audience as a distinct entity, something he gradually 'sought to phase out' altogether.[75] In any case, if a desire to choreograph moments of social improvisation is a clear point of contact between the studiouse session and Happenings, this link is further strengthened if we consider Kaprow's famed definition of art as 'just paying

73 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 6. It should be noted that, on the other hand and as expressed before, the studiouse session has instead no interest whatsoever in 'a raised consciousness', which is also listed by Bishop in this same passage.

74 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 94.

75 Jonathan Crary, *Tricks of the Light: Essays on Art and Spectacle* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2023), 11.

attention'.[76] Despite the SI's well-documented antipathy for this format – a practice which they considered to be naïve, 'derivative of their own', and lacking in '*poetic* intensity' – Bishop argues that these accusations were at least in part misplaced, given that highly transgressive Happenings such as those staged in France by Jean-Jacques Lebel, for example, were actually anything but gentle.[77] In fact, she continues, these afforded access 'into a space of collective transformation where categories of individual and social, conscious and unconscious, active and passive, would purportedly disintegrate'.[78] Bishop further contends that, if US Happenings were admittedly politically tame when not avowedly apolitical, European Happenings instead 'contained a conscious socio-political critique of affluent consumer society' and of the bourgeois notion of art as a detached sphere.[79]

It is in the wake of this mode of experimental reaction against the passivity produced by a separation of art from everyday life that emerged a mode of participatory art that curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has described as *relational aesthetic* in an influential homonymous essay.[80] The type of art assessed throughout Bourriaud's text is one that revolves around staged moments of open-ended conviviality and which takes the collective creation

76 Allan Kaprow, 'The Real Experiment', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993 [1983]), 202. Laura Cull has also offered an exceptional appraisal of Kaprow's take on "attention", underscoring its relevance to the artist's work – see: Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 145-77.

77 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 100-1.

78 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 101.

79 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 94-5.

80 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2009 [1998]). It is worth pointing out that, in a short essay published exactly a decade later, design theorist Andrew Blauvelt described a very similar relational "turn" in design practices, which he termed 'relational design', although surprisingly without any mention of Bourriaud's work nor of its critical legacy – see: Andrew Blauvelt, 'Towards Relational Design', *Design Observer* 3 (2008).

of meaning not only as its central *theme* but also as the "matter" itself of the artwork. In Bourriaud's words, then, relational aesthetics names a tendency developing in the 1990s whereby art 'tak[es] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space'.[81] Not unlike the studiouse session, this approach then signals a shift of interest towards 'the temporary collectives and communities that coalesce for the purpose of producing the [artwork]', as Shukaitis writes, prior to the artwork itself.[82] Another aspect of particular interest here is that, although often adopting the installation format as a springboard for conviviality, thus involving three-dimensional structures and props, 'relational art works insist upon *use* rather than contemplation'.[83] Conceptual artist Liam Gillick's 1992 *Pinboard Project*, just to cite one of Bishop's and Bourriaud's examples, indeed comprised 'a bulletin board containing instructions for use [and] potential items for inclusion on the board', thus exploring 'the space between sculpture and functional design' and considering 'the presence [and actions] of an audience [as] an essential component of [the artwork]'.[84]

Another set of interesting similarities to what staged via the studiouse session can be found in dance-related experimental practices as well as theoretical articulations. This is of course unsurprising, not only given this study's emphasis on corporeal motion but also because of how the dance-form and particularly questions of choreography have already featured quite prominently throughout this chapter and beyond. If Manning herself has provided a powerful exploration of the complex politics of dancing bodies through the example of Argentinian tango,[85] let me instead briefly consider here a practice known as *contact improvisation* (CI). Pioneered in the early

81 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14.

82 Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines*, 107.

83 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 55.

84 Bishop, 'Antagonism', 58, 61.

85 See: Manning, *Politics of Touch*.

1970s by dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton, and influenced by Asian martial arts such as aikido and tai chi,[86] at its most basic *contact improvisation* is a mode of dance that

> is rooted in partnering and is based on the senses of touch and balance through which information concerning each other's movement is transmitted to the partners respectively. It differs from the partnering of classical ballet in the sense that no set choreography or rules apply. Through actions such as rolling, crawling, falling, jumping, taking and giving each other's body weight, the improvisation proceeds in an open-ended way. *Sensing, rather than preset intentions, provides the desired motivation for the dance movements*, and movement free from prior convention is one of the outcomes.[87]

Writing about CI, anthropologist Cynthia Novack explains that, during this spontaneous mutuality of and in motion, contact improvisers 'often yield rather than resist', participating in a collaborative exercise or 'social dance' that, at least at its inception, was meant to literally embody egalitarian sentiments of solidarity and cooperation.[88] Because of its rejection of any dominating figure dictating which moves are to be executed, and due to its inherently collective format, CI relies entirely on an *emergent* somatic and kinetic negotiation between partners. As such, and in a way similarly to the studiouse session, this experimental dance seeks to deploy corporeal motion as a way of 'developing our "habit of attention"'.[89]

Stepping even closer to this book's articulation and enactment of a kinaesthetic sociality of use, the work of performance theorist André Lepecki can illuminate some further intersections between

86 Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 11.

87 Curtis L. Carter, 'Improvisation in Dance', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000): 186-7 (emphasis added).

88 Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 8, 11, 11.

89 Robert Turner, 'Steve Paxton's "Interior Techniques": Contact Improvisation and Political Power', *TDR/The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (25 August 2010): 125.

the studiouse session and experimental dance, as he considered 'the noticeable presence of objects as main performative elements' in some forms of contemporary performance art.[90] In a 2012 essay, Lepecki analyses a number of occurrences in which 'choreographers bring *stuff* onto stages and into rooms and galleries' in a rather unconventional way: that is, not as simple inert tools to be manipulated by actors and dancers but, rather, as 'vectors of subjectivation' or even '*surrogate performers*' that are radically 'emptied out of all instrumental use'.[91] In relation to exemplary cases such as Yingmei Duan's 2008 performance *Rubbish City* – which featured a 'labyrinth of rubbish' punctuated by the performances of five actors as 'ghostly presences' – Lepecki argues that 'objects and subjects are both stripped of instrumentality, functionality, value, and identity' and are thus made to '*tarry alongside*' each other.[92]

Now, I would like to briefly pause and reflect on this diverse reel of illustrative examples. If both avant-gardes experiments and relational art represented a reaction against passive spectatorship, what came out of this move gave rise to yet another set of critically debated issues to do with the politics of participation instead. For the most part, these overlap with (and, in fact, predate and inform) what already discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to participatory design, such as the potential instrumentalisation of social inclusion that some design practices engage in, turning participation into an empty and ambiguous buzzword or, worse, into a counterinsurgency weapon of social conformity and commodified 'entrepreneurial collectivism'.[93] Also worth noting is that, according to Bourriaud, relational art operates by creating

90 André Lepecki, 'Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object', *October* 140 (2012), 75. My gratitude here goes to Neslihan Tepehuan for bringing this essay to my attention.

91 Lepecki, 'Moving as Thing', 76-9.

92 Lepecki, 'Moving as Thing', 78, 81 (slightly altered).

93 Shukaitis, *Combination Acts,* 16. Also see: Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13; and Bishop, 'Antagonism', 65 – the latter specifically commenting on Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

what he calls 'social interstices'.[94] By this he means spaces of democratic encounter and exchange existing within the dominant capitalist frame but that, rather than directly engaging in a broad form of social critique that Bourriaud deems 'futile', instead limit themselves to proposing alternative modes of togetherness as 'everyday micro-utopias'.[95] This is a problematic and unconvincing divorcement of structural conditions and micro-interventions that Shukaitis rightly contests. He writes:

> There are many ways to congeal and conjoin minor articulations informed by and relating to large social questions, that are fundamentally concerned with an overall social critique, without having that critique determine and overly confine these practices.[96]

It is indeed this same kind of micro-macro split that, when paired with a fetishization of scale, produces what Shukaitis describes as a 'Trotskyite' marginalisation when not outright ridiculing of micropolitical (and nanopolitical) interventions, deemed to be irredeemably insular, ineffective, self-indulgent, and ultimately irrelevant to "the bigger picture", thus a waste of time and not worth pursuing. [97]

Regarding experimental dance, let me consider two crucial issues. First, it must not be ignored that, as CI has grown in popularity since the '70s and its practice has consequently diversified, in some cases this has diverted quite substantially from what Paxton had in mind. Performer and scholar Robert Turner has indeed pointed out that, despite Paxton's explicit emphasis on 'CI's potential to produce freedom *for the group*', throughout subsequent developments this has instead largely been 'characterised as a therapy developing the *individual's* "personal power and strength of presence"' and which is 'almost never discussed as affecting change in political power'.[98] This way, Turner concludes that newer iterations

94 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14-8.

95 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 31.

96 Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines*, 108.

97 Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines*, 108.

98 Turner, 'Steve Paxton's "Interior Techniques"', 129-30.t

of CI ultimately have sought to reframe the practice in a way that is 'more amenable to (or even as a variation of) American liberal cultural practice', thus becoming a depoliticised 'personal aesthetics, a celebration of individualism and individual experience'.[99] Second, in his remarkable 2006 book *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki perceptively warns us against automatically positive connotations of motion, flux, and becoming 'as that which will always apply its force towards a politics of progress' as well as, conversely, against the mistakenly assumed fixity of dominant, reactionary, and/or oppressive regimes.[100] In a context where, instead and as already discussed, the forces of individuation operate through both exhortations and impositions to constantly transform, adjust, improve, become anew by the assorted, rapacious, logistical terms of so-called late capitalism, it is not mobility *per se*, but a *specific grammar of kinesis* that must be developed as a collectively emancipatory alternative. That is to say, a type of motion or mobilisation that could instead incorporate, magnify, even hinge on what Lepecki calls 'kinesthetic stuttering'[101] and which Montgomery and bergman describe as 'the hesitations and stammerings that come through the encounter with other ways of living and fighting',[102] thereby attempting a 'choreographic interruption of "flow or a continuum of movement"'.[103] The studiouse session that follows represents *one* such attempt.

Part II: An exercise in seven acts

As anticipated earlier on, the studiouse session could easily run the risk of being superficially equated with the phase of motional experimentation alone, which is to say with the playful use of the kinetic machine. While understandable, if anything because of the

99 Turner, 'Steve Paxton's "Interior Techniques"', 130.

100 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 12.

101 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 1.

102 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 182.

103 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 1.

contraption's conspicuous material presence, such an assessment would however be misleading. In fact, were the pragmatic "phase" of use to be considered in isolation and decontextualised, excessive emphasis might end up being placed on the machine itself and what it does, arguably casting this as the endpoint of an antecedent and concluded process (i.e., the already mentioned "grand finale" effect) – rather than on the emergence, largely *around it*, of a scene of studious, undercommon sociality far more complex than that. This would then fail to account for the more layered experiential assemblage of which the moment of use involving the machine represents but the centrepiece. In other words: of course, this playful phase is a – if not *the* – pivotal moment around which the event has been choreographed; and yet, I believe that drawing attention solely to it would actually strip this part of the activity and the studiouse session as a whole of their more expansive significance within the present exploration of a studious use. Such significance must instead be read in conjunction with other elements, perhaps less dramatic yet highly meaningful, of which the activity is composed. Moreover, because I very much want to see this particular session as only one amongst many possible experimentations with a studious use, I would not want to suggest that what I am calling a studiouse session must necessarily revolve around or even include a similar material infrastructure.

The studious, affective intensity pursued through this session is better identified in the concerted interplay between various moments: moments of play, of course, but also moments of scheming, of reflection, of conviviality, and, in keeping with Lepecki's invocation, even of a kind of idleness. To this end, the activity might perhaps be narrated as an exercise comprising seven acts – planning, call, threshold, opening, play, hiatus, flight – all of which I consider to be in some way studious. It is crucial to reiterate once more that, throughout the review of each act, I will be focussing whenever and however possible only on infrastructural and methodological aspects, desisting from proposing or, indeed, superposing an interpretation of the participants' experience. In other words, I will concentrate on describing how certain enabling constraints were set up and why certain choreographic decisions were

taken, while trying not to turn this chronicle into a blueprint, framework, or instruction manual that might inadvertently fold together *a* proposed "how could we do X" not only with a specific, normatively programmatic, and supposedly replicable "what to do" but also, and more problematically still, with a "what to *feel*".[104]

FIRST ACT // PLANNING

The process of planning for this studiouse session, largely inspired by informal dialogue with several more or less frequent interlocutors (as if this were ever not the case!), turned out to be punctuated not only or, in fact, not primarily by the expected array of propositional questions related to the format – e.g. Where to hold the event? Who to invite? How much information to reveal? Etc. Indeed, almost every single embryonic attempt to answer such questions was soon met and systematically undercut by a series of dismissive whys: why even *asking* this or that question to begin with? This reflexive doubtfulness, challenging the very grounds underpinning each propositional evaluation, however, was not the manifestation of some kind of cynical or defeatist impulse. Rather, it signalled a process of methodological unlearning, of underlearning, perhaps of "de-learning" being underway. Which is to say, it was a way of gradually leaving behind a set of instinctively familiar manners of organising and thinking about collective events that could bring no result other than that of reproducing the evaluative, productivist, knowledge-oriented formalisms proper of an education-based mode of study.

This should not be taken to mean that all decisions were eventually rejected in favour of the "anything goes" attitude Massumi warns us against, but instead that certain seemingly crucial considerations ended up losing much of their relevance. And this is because

104 This excessively instructional or didactic tone, conflating "how to do" and "what to do" into an operation manual of sorts, is a limitation that Paolo Plotegher attributes to the second half of the Invisible Committee's book *The Coming Insurrection* – a criticism that the present study has taken into consideration. See: Plotegher, 'What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?', 285.

questions concerning, just to provide some examples, the experimentation with a plurality of formats, or the identity-based features and subjectivities of participants to be invited, or even the extent to which participants should or should not have been made aware of the nature of the kinetic machine, appeared to betray a desire to over-control, to over-curate, to construct the best possible conditions for something, for the harvesting of information, thereby turning a practice of study into an instrument of data production.

The phase of planning then involved a particular mode of curatorial work, consisting of a process of simultaneous *activation* and *deactivation*: activation of enabling constraints, as a set of designed conditions of entrance into various moments and modes of sociality; deactivation of compulsions to pre-empt, to forecast, to control the unfolding of the session and, with it, of its sociality, all the way to its ostensible conclusions (in terms of meaning, rather than strictly temporal).

SECOND ACT // CALL

Of course, one question that proved to be particularly complex, in curatorial terms, had to do with the selection of participants to be invited. At first, instinctively, the approach was to treat this process as something of casting or recruitment procedure. A recruitment that appeared to be less concerned with actual, emergent sociality than with an abstract collection of identities – whether normatively imposed or autonomously chosen. In other words, the main preoccupation seemed to be a desire to source the most diversified portfolio of individual features possible. To be sure, this was not only an ingrained knee-jerk adherence to a form of representational tokenism that is absolutely rife in academia and other cultural sectors alike. Rather, it was primarily, unthinkingly, and maybe to some extent more problematically still, a manner of ensuring an increased breadth of responses according to easily recognisable categories and attributes: the more diversity, the more "data", the more insight. And yet, what was the use of the data thus gathered going to be if, as

previously claimed, the studious session had neither ethnographic nor engineering ambitions? What was the point of striving to summon a variety of possible responses to the activity – abiding by the same terms of individuation this book seeks to refute, no less – if the session had pledged to be "no deliverable, all process", in keeping with Massumi? Would this not come to represent a questionable instance of delegated performance and outsourced authenticity, as defined via Bishop in Chapter 2, merely asking people 'to perform an aspect of their identity'?[105] And anyway, was not friendship, after all, the mode of undercommon sociality that a studious use was hoping to experiment with and celebrate?

Perhaps it is here, in the practice and continuous rehearsal of friendship, that another selection criterion can be found. Perhaps a genuine exploration of friendship must begin with or, maybe more accurately, *carry on* through emergent complicities that, as I have been arguing, have nothing to do with an ontology of individual predicates and which neither can nor ought to be engineered because always already in process. Complicities that cannot be staged simply through artificial representation and superficially defined diversity or similarity, but only woven and intensified as and through the differential sharing of a process, as and through a manner of attending to a shared situation together. Perhaps, like the Invisible Committee urge (albeit in a very different context), a studiouse session would best flow '*from where [we] are*, from the milieu [we] frequent, the territory [we] inhabit'[106] – whatever that might be and whomever that might include at any given point in time – rather than feeling compelled to always look elsewhere first.

And so, because this would mean to 'start instead from ... the ties that link [us] to what is going on around [us]',[107] the decision was

105 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 220.

106 Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 228. The same exhortation of 'starting from where we are and seeking affinities with others' is echoed by Montgomery and bergman too – see: Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 107.

107 Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 163-4.

taken to simply send a call out to several friends and friends-of-friends *[Fig.18]*. (To be clear, I am not advocating crass hyper-localism and indifference towards what lies beyond friendship, towards invaluable practices of solidarity bridging realities otherwise painfully far apart, and not just in geographic terms. Likewise, as I said before, my challenge here is to a tokenistic, shopping-list approach to identity and differentiation: I categorically do not mean to dismiss or downplay the very real misery caused by identity-based oppression.)

The tone of this *"call"*, somewhat inspired by an anonymous text of the same name,[108] was hoping to signal that something had already been set in motion and friends were invited to tag along. Which is to say that the attempt was for the invite not to be framed as a formal request for a contribution *to come*, but rather to be received as the acknowledgement of a complicity already underway, which the very issuing of the call sought to draw attention to. On this point, while discussing the practices of the 2011 occupation movement in London, Harney proposes a helpful distinction between request, demand, and call, which can offer further clarification. Unlike requests or demands for something to be granted by (or despite) an external agent or authority, Harney suggests, 'some kind of demand [is] already being enacted, fulfilled in the call itself'.[109] The same stance is taken by the Laboratory for Insurrectionary Imagination (LABOFII) whom, in a text that tellingly features the word "demanding" struck through in its title, cite Joseph Beuys to exhort: '"Don't wait to begin, use what you have." Start where you are at. *Hell, you've already started*. What are the tools and tendencies around you?'[110] It is precisely this kind of direct, enacted immediacy that this call was hoping to transmit.

108 Anonymous, 'Call / Appel'. This pamphlet, originally self-published in French with the title *Appel* and later translated and distributed online, is often attributed to members of the collectives Tiqqun and Invisible Committee, although this rumoured authorship was never confirmed.

109 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 134.

110 Laboratory for Insurrectionary Imagination, *A user's guide to demanding the impossible* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2010), 8.

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

Not One: A collective exercise of thought in motion

When

Thursday 5th July, 2.00pm-4.30pm

Where

Dorset Place Building
Rooms 501-502 (Fifth Floor)
University of Brighton
3 Dorset Place, Brighton BN2 1ST

What

You are invited to take part in a collective exercise. This session will involve concerted experimentation with movement and play through the mediation of a kinetic machine. You won't be studied; your reactions won't be studied; your reflections won't be studied. And yet, we will all be studying, *together*: by acting and reacting, interfering and resonating, moving and being moved.

Why

This activity is part of my PhD research. However, I am not interested in results or data as such: I am not interested in *what* happens throughout the session, but rather *that* it happens. I am less interested in *what* this means than in *how* it means. I am interested in *activation*, rather than outcomes. This is an event, not a test.

Consent

The activity will be recorded, which means that you will be asked for permission to be filmed and photographed. Of course, you can request to be anonymised, which will not prevent your participation in the activity. No data as such will be extracted through the event, but there will be time for any question you might have about "outcomes". More details regarding your participation will be explained on the day.

PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR ATTENDANCE, THANK YOU!

Fig. 18: *Call for participation*, 2018

To this end, the text of the call, sent by email with subject "*Invite – Not One: A collective exercise of thought in motion*", read as follows:

> "You are invited to take part in a collective exercise. This session will involve concerted experimentation with movement and play through the mediation of a kinetic machine. You won't be studied; your reactions won't be studied; your reflections won't be studied. And yet, we will all be studying, together: by acting and reacting, interfering and resonating, moving and being moved."

THIRD ACT // THRESHOLD

Now, if a curatorial effort to cultivate differential attunement entails designing shared conditions of entrance into the event, careful consideration shall be given not only to a virtual entry (the call, in this case), but also to the material, environmental, corporeal *transition into* that event proper. This moment is what Manning and Massumi describe as an 'inaugural passage: the initial passing of the threshold into the event'.[111] Much like with the initial phase of planning (and, as discussed further below, with the ensuing conversational phases), while arranging this liminal moment, the activation of certain 'anticipatory tendencies' that could enable this collective, usely experimentation with social life had to be accompanied, as its flipside, by an equally decisive process of deactivation.[112] A conscious attempt was indeed made to 'disable participants' habitual presuppositions':[113] more specifically, it seemed important that the same informality and immediacy characterising the call would be consistently reflected in the orchestration of the event proper, from the word go, neutralising as much as possible an atmosphere of task- or learning-oriented productivity and the preoccupation with

111 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 98.

112 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 98.

113 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 98.

"getting stuff done" that too often prevail in research-related events such as workshops.

To this end, in a similar vein to the SenseLab's inaugural event *Dancing the Virtual* (2005), it was determined that the "passing of the threshold" into this studiouse session had to be in the spirit of *convivial hospitality*. Not in the sense of there being a host receiving guests, but rather as a diffused and non-personal feel of hospitality being materialised in the situation. Without getting too bogged down in these terms' rich and complex philosophical significance,[114] what is meant here is simply that it seemed crucial to endow the session and the physical space in which this was primarily set to unfold with a welcoming and "de-professionalised" ambience. As a way of 'breaking expectations in a gentle and inviting way', then, the first thing that attendees encountered, upon their entrance into the first of two rooms, was a table with an assorted selection of snacks and beverages, to which everyone had been encouraged in advance to contribute by bringing any food or drinks they wanted to share, if they so wished.[115] Not quite a potluck meal nor a corporate-style catering, this presented as something of an indoor picnic, 'in a way that called forth the rituals of conviviality surrounding shared eating in noninstitutional settings'.[116]

It is important to note that this tactical informality was adopted not primarily for its expected *effectiveness* – in terms of its suitability for the achievement of a desired result – but rather, once again, for its *affectiveness*, for its contribution in an explicit celebration of social life as the shared point of departure (somewhat deepening the session's connection to experiences in relational art and Happenings discussed above).[117]

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114 I am thinking specifically about classic works by Ivan Illich and Jacques Derrida respectively. See: Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009 [1973]); Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1997]).

115 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 74.

116 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 100.

117 This tension between the "effectiveness" and "affectiveness" of a given tactic is originally discussed by Stevphen Shukaitis. See: Shukaitis, *Imaginal*

FOURTH ACT // OPENING

The day of the event began with a brief welcome to the session during which the attendees were each given a booklet containing a tentative schedule. The programme comprised four parts – Welcome, Activation, Break, Discussion – and included a short general introduction to the studiouse session. This text offered some caveats and clarifications regarding the activity (as reported earlier in this chapter), without however wishing to achieve any great degree of explanatory clarity or rigour regarding the event's operational details and their theoretical underpinnings, opting instead for a vaguely poetic prose.

Particular emphasis was placed on communicating that the idea was not to study participants and their reactions, but rather to join in and be joined up through a moment of collective study. Much like with the deactivation of habitual conducts attempted through the event's Threshold, this caveat was crucial in order to discourage internalised behaviours and distance the studiouse session from customary roles, rituals, and protocols attached to ideas and performances of "test", "workshop", and "experiment", when these are intended as insight- or evidence-oriented activities. The booklet explained that, yes, the session was going to be filmed and photographed, but that would not mean that the attendees' reflections or their corporeal motion were going to be used as research "data" per se. In Manning and Massumi's words, the prefatory text sought to dispel 'those tendencies ingrained ... by the conventional genres of interaction in the art and academic world', to instead prime participants for a spirit of *experiential indebtedness*.[118] No specific *result* was expected of them, nor would be extracted from their actions, not least because – again – there was not even a clear agenda driving the whole event to begin with.

Attendees were invited to read and briefly discuss amongst themselves the text, their expectations for the session, and whatever else they thought to be relevant or interesting. The focus was squarely on enabling an undirected dialogue while avoiding

Machines, 142.

118 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 98.

a formalised instructional presentation of the project. And yet, in keeping with the desire for the studiouse session not to be primarily a study *of* but rather a study *with*, it seemed equally self-defeating for me to take an improbable observer position –detached, inaccessible, but also overseeing – opposed to observed participants absorbed in the action – as is arguably the case with design methods such as cultural probes. Which means that with the term "participants" I am referring here to *all* those who were present for the activity: inviter and invited, caller and respondents, designer-researcher and friends. *All* differentially immersed in a moment of sociality; *all* indebted, no creditors; *all* partaking in a general and shared incompleteness; *all* studiously using – or, at least, trying to do so. And so, this conversation was also the opportunity for discussing some of the theoretical and pragmatic motivations informing the studious session while sharing the desire for this not to degenerate into the authorial, expertise-oriented, didactical "verticalism" of a Q&A session. This dialogue continued until a certain impatience for the session to move on to the phase of playful use was more or less directly expressed by some attendees.

FIFTH ACT // PLAY

Following the phase of conversation, all participants moved to the second of two rooms, where the kinetic machine was located, together with a few chairs and tables. No procedural instructions were given or tasks assigned to the participants, other than to "use" the machine. An exuberant attendee volunteered to get the play started and swiftly began interacting with the machine, after which other participants joined in the action and proceeded to autonomously coordinate the unfolding of the rest of the session. Strategizing, commenting, observing, taking turns, inviting each other into the action, improvising unexpected and often humorous gestures and ways of approaching the machine, exploring the machine itself as a material accomplice – neither object nor subject of their collective and collectivised attention, or perhaps both at once *[Fig.19]*.

This corporeal correspondence took the shape of a play of rhythms: a ludic and shared 'enthusiasm of the body', as Massumi might describe this by way of philosopher Raymond Ruyer, arranged on the spot and entirely according to the attendees' emergent, collective desires as well as to mechanical contingencies. Paxton's CI comes back to mind here *[Fig. 20-21]*.[119]

Fig. 19: *Studiouse session 1*, 2018

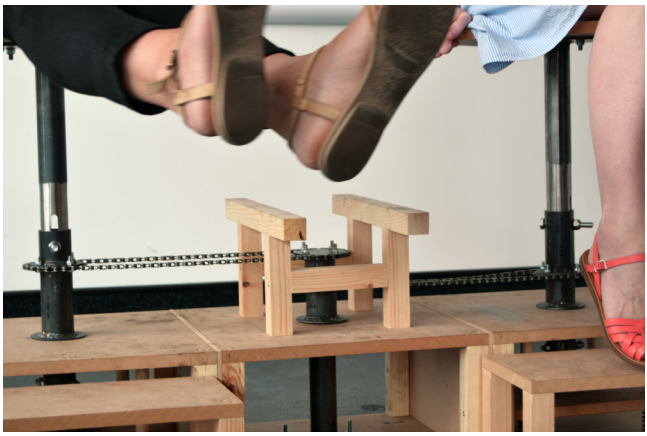

Fig. 20: *Studiouse session 2*, 2018

119 Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 141.

Fig. 21: Studiouse *session 3*, 2018

It is hardly possible to speak in more depth about this phase of action without falling prey to an analytic impulse, overstepping the merely descriptive limits that I set up earlier on. Of course, something of the affective liveliness arising throughout this collective experience of a studious use will inevitably be captured and expressed by the images included here. However, while this regrettable visual seizure seemed necessary, if anything due to the formally academic context of a doctoral research in which this session originally took place, it is nevertheless my hope that the photographic medium alone will here at least operate on a less prescriptive register of intelligibility compared to a textual exegesis.[120] If the stubborn inclusion in this account of several images, my procedural reservations notwithstanding, could come across as perplexing, my wager is that the point of this account is not to erase any traces of contradictions, feigning a flawlessly thought-through activity, but

120 For some key discussions of the tension between written text and image, see for example: Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000 [1980]); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979 [1977]).

instead to shine a light onto these very tensions and dilemmas. Besides, Bishop (disapprovingly) argues that

> To grasp participatory art from images alone is almost impossible: casual photographs of people talking, eating, attending a workshop or screening or seminar tell us very little, almost nothing, about the concept and context of a given project. They rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and *convey nothing of the affective dynamic* that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them.[121]

If Bishop's indictment here is correct, could this not be used advantageously? Could this way of *telling* "little, almost nothing" *about* the actual affective dynamics at play in a collective event not be itself a deliberate choice? What could it mean and what would it take, in the particular case of this book's exploration of a studious use, to "show, not tell", as the saying goes? Could this very book be considered as itself a peculiar form of enabling constraint, compelling me to reconsider how we might hold in tension the ephemerality of studious social life and the relative fixity of its published narrativization?

Either way, one last point that is probably worth mentioning about this ludic moment is that even the repeated (and unintentional!) "malfunctioning" of the machine presented opportunities for other studious complicities to play out *[Fig.22]*. Indeed, it turned out that not even "repairing" the mechanism was pragmatically feasible by one person alone, despite the keen and impromptu efforts of a self-appointed "mechanic". These new, unforeseen circumstances, these unintended constraints, ended up enabling a new, unforeseen pretext for collective use.

121 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 5 (emphasis added).

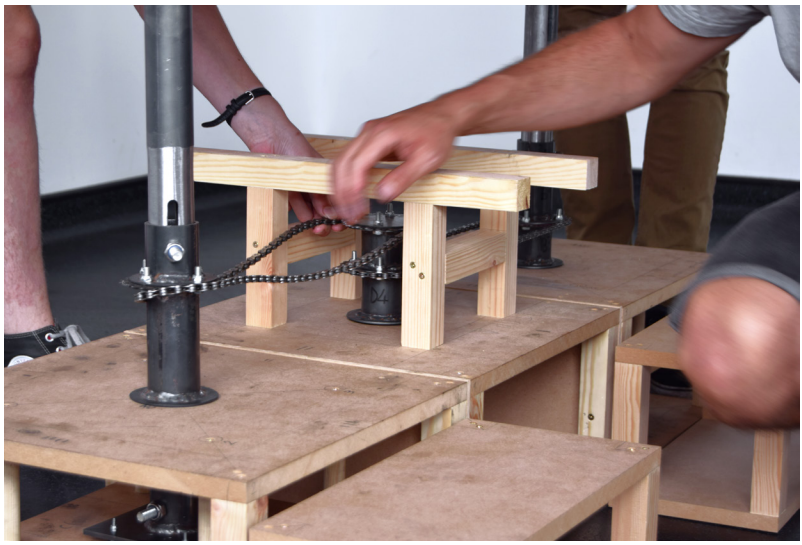

Fig. 22: *Kinetic Machine "malfunctioning"*, 2018

SIXTH ACT // HIATUS

While planning for this studiouse session, something that was taken into careful consideration, together with the tone of informality already discussed, was the danger for activity to morph into draining *hyper*-activity. Of course, fatigue can at times represent the joyful aftermath of a burst of corporeal enthusiasm, testament to an intense kinaesthetic affectability. However, exhaustion can also and frequently emerge out of a deeply ingrained sense of duty, out of the constant stream of received or self-imposed tasks that come to punctuate social life, out of the overstimulation that relentlessly demands a somatic response and, often, a will to achieve. Political life tends to be a prime scene for this mode of hyper-activism. As the nanopolitics group note: 'Too often we have found that our political activism mirrors the hyper-productive mode of our work'.[122]

122 Nanopolitics Group, *Nanopolitics Handbook*, 28.

Likewise, in their piercing account of the phenomenon they call 'rigid radicalism', Montgomery and bergman take a closer look at political hyper-activism and observe that this latter form of exhaustion is particularly widespread in so-called radical milieus, 'precisely where we are supposed to feel most alive'.[123] This type of fatigue can be sensed, for instance, 'when we feel the need to perform in certain ways ... and make the right gestures'.[124]

Arguably, this noxious hyper-activism is undergirded by a very narrow conception of action in and of itself. Such is Garcés' assessment: she warns us that conflating "action" [*acción*] and "activity" [*actividad*] could turn into 'a trap in which the rhythm of productivity continues to prevail'.[125] Garcés proposes that, if we are to liberate our acting from the ensnaring grip of productivism – that is, in keeping with Agamben, if we are to extract it from the sphere of both *poiesis* and praxis, thus making it inoperative – we must begin by moving 'beyond the dominion of activity, towards a broader concept of action'.[126] Crucially, she contends, this operation would require that we refrain from dismissing 'any period of "inactivity" [as] a hindrance to cultural life'.[127] The expanded mode of action thus articulated emerges as one that 'includes inactivity, dead times, impasses, detours, errors, tiredness, disorientation, the need to think it all again'.[128]

Therefore, in order to 'avoid the quick exhaustion to which any cultural, creative or academic proposal is subjected today', at least according to Garcés, a phase of respite followed that of playful use.[129] During this moment of open idleness, some attendees returned to the first room to have some more food or drinks, some wandered

123 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 20.

124 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 168.

125 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 83.

126 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 84.

127 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 83.

128 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 84.

129 Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 84.

out of the building to catch some fresh air or have a smoke, some chatted about all sorts of topics – including but not limited to the experience just shared.

SEVENTH ACT // FLIGHT

Everyone finally reconvened in the second room (the one where the kinetic machine was located) for a conclusive phase of collective reflection on the studiouse session as a whole – which was not to be recorded in any way. Once again, the expressed commitment was for this dialogue not to turn into a traditional Q&A session that would likely reproduce and indeed exacerbate clear demarcations between an inquiring audience and a responding author – not least because the "author", in this case, had very few if any answers to offer. Indeed, rather than encouraging a genuine correspondence – as the shared elaboration and celebration of a self-dispossessive studious indebtedness – more often than not this format seeks by its very nature to afford the facile gratification of a sense of resolution and proper closure, the re-establishing of something like a lost equilibrium – whether or not doubts are eventually cleared and consensus over meaning is supposedly reached.[130]

And yet, the protocols of this tired ritual infest so many cultural, artistic, and academic events that avoiding or at the very least trying to diminish their anaesthetic effect is no mean feat. To this end, it was attempted (perhaps only in part successfully) to contrast such a tendency by way of a diffusion of retrospective "*ower*ship" (rather than ownership) of the event and its significance, as already stated in the booklet. A shared owership given by not proposing a specific agenda or set of themes to be addressed; by explicitly noting that questions regarding the potentialities and limitations of the session were bound to be collectively explored rather than answered or evaluated, studied rather than learned; by welcoming

130 Massumi makes a similar observation about plenaries. See: Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 75.

the possibility that the mode of study we had been engaged in was striving to be 'not transformational [but rather] deformational',[131] that it might be neither "useful" nor properly "valuable", and that authorial explanations and resolutions would not be forthcoming because the event was to be (and to carry on being) nothing other than what attendees made of it. Ultimately, this was an attempt at letting people exit the session as differentially as they had entered it earlier on, albeit (hopefully) endowed with a shared and intensified haptic feeling of having joyfully consented, at least for a moment, not to be "one".

131 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'From cooperation to black operation: A Conversation with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten on The Undercommons' (online), *transversal texts* (April 2016).

6

Coda

A terminally ill woman asks her husband to tell her a story so as to alleviate her unbearable pains. No sooner does he begin his tale than she stops him: "No, not like that. I want you to speak to me in an unknown language". "Unknown?" He asks. "A language that doesn't exist. For I have such a need not to understand anything at all". The husband asks himself: how can you speak a language that doesn't exist? He starts off by mumbling some strange words and feels like a fool, as if he were establishing his inability to be human. But gradually, he begins to feel more at ease with this language that is devoid of rules. And he no longer knows whether he's speaking, singing, or praying. [...] When we were children, all of us experienced that first language, the language of chaos, all of us enjoyed that divine moment when our life was capable of being all lives, and the world still awaited a destiny.

Mia Couto, Languages We Don't Know We Know, 2015: 81-82

And so here we are: back to the end, to *an* end. If this book started by trying to do away with a peculiar end that masquerades as *the* beginning – the figure of the individual, particularly in its user and student guises – our journey now formally concludes with a renewed resolve to join those collectively, daily, and often understatedly starting elsewhere, so to speak: those whose narratives and whose practices are avowedly with no beginning nor end. Those insisting on not *being* an end, at once besieging and deserting the Kantian "Kingdom of Ends" by insisting instead on being just means, inextricably tangled up in their general mutuality. Joining those who, in other words, are and have been experimenting with minor modes of sociality that call into question, sidestep, or actively undermine aspirational as well as coerced fantasies of individuation, unhindered sovereignty,

personal self-reliance. Those meeting a 'commitment to separation',[1] whether showing up in the form of individual uniqueness, of in-group exclusionary homogeneity, or of logistical governance, with a commitment to difference without separability. To frame such an effort as a commitment is here to refute the solitary confines of consciousness and embrace instead the inevitably collective, lively rehearsals of shared differentiation (or differential sharedness) as studious practices. *Cum-mittere*: to be placed and partake in togetherness. More specifically, I have sought to frame this commitment as a social, affective, undercommon mode of study that this book examined from the perspective of use and which, perhaps incautiously, I ventured to describe as a practice of friendship.

In closing, I want to return to the question of design or, rather, of design*ing* and design infrastructuring, thinking about its possible contribution to such a commitment, and to formulate some reflections that I hope will actually provide openings for yet more undercommon usely studying.

USELY PREFIGURATION: DESIGN TEMPORALITIES AND AS-IFS

When assessing in Chapter 2 the type of projects commonly associated with a certain canon of critical and speculative design (CSD), especially typified by Dunne & Raby, I underscored this kind of practice's future-focussed orientation. Now, unlike in other speculative work produced by design researchers at Goldsmiths, at first this does not appear to be a prominent feature in the case of IRS's *ProbeTools*. However, I would argue that even here an underlying forward-looking stance is ultimately baked into the project, given that the use of the probes is explicitly functional to generate results to be interpreted, from which to learn, and that could inspire further research. In other words, *ProbeTools*' intrinsic futurity is expressed in the strategically goal-oriented recourse to playful interaction as a productive process.

1 Erin Manning, 'The Being of Relation', *e-flux* 135 (April 2023).

Let me recall once again the IRS' own wording: 'clever opportunities for play that don't reveal anything meaningful aren't useful either'.[2] It is nevertheless beyond doubt that a preoccupation with forecasting and looking beyond the present is clearly much more pronounced in the "what if?" scenarios pioneered by Dunne & Raby. This is not only because the speculations staged by this type of work are *about* possible futures: more remarkably, it is the very *use* of most CSD props and accompanying "unreality", in keeping with Dunne & Raby's terminology, that squarely belong to that future, not to the here-and-now. With this in mind, let me draw the reader's attention to a passage from *Speculative Everything*, where Dunne & Raby unequivocally distance their projects from what they call 'prefigurative futures' or 'pre-enactments': namely, they argue, practices that 'also use props to transport viewers' imagination but ... in this role they are bringing a specific future to the present so that it can be partially experienced in advance'.[3] By contrast, what they propose is for CSD's 'props to transport viewers' imagination into a thought experiment, or what-if', so that, in the act of picturing these props being engaged with and handled in a possible future setting, "viewers" (i.e. we) can assess whether or not those are the kind of world they might prefer to inhabit and the kind of uses they might prefer to partake in.[4]

Leaving aside what has already been said about Dunne & Raby's work more generally, both here and elsewhere, it is perhaps this point that can now offer an opportunity not so much to accentuate a rupture with what is at this point in time admittedly only *one* influential CSD paradigm amongst several others – as Dunne & Raby themselves acknowledged[5] – but instead to clarify something crucial about the mode of usely experimentation I have sought to outline throughout. Something to do, indeed, with the same concept

2 Interaction Research Studio, 'ProbeTools', 34-5.

3 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 93.

4 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 93.

5 See the forthcoming 'Preface to the Paperback Edition' in Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Paperback Ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), viii.

of *prefiguration* that Dunne & Raby appear to reject and that the likes of the IRS have not taken up.

In all fairness, prefiguration itself is anything but a clearly defined concept, with so much having been written on it (and on prefigurative *politics* more specifically)[6] in the past twenty or so years laying bare how 'open to diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations' this term can be.[7] Let me present below an overview of prefiguration, before taking into account a few conceptual and pragmatic nuances, tensions, and ambiguities that certain framings too often overlook or even misconstrue, but which I think could be quite consequential for the practices of design infrastructuring that this book is gesturing towards. I shall clarify, however, that I will not be reviewing the genealogical development of the term prefiguration, reportedly beginning within the context of Christian theology before entering the political lexicon,[8] but only focus instead on methodological or processual questions within a contemporary context. Moreover, my aim here is

6 E.g. see: David Graeber, 'The New Anarchists', *New Left Review* 13, no. 6 (2002): 61–73; Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2008); Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement Is Changing the Face of Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and Its Aspirations* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010); Luke Yates, 'Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements', *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 1–21.

7 Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Prague), *Acting as If: Prefigurative Politics in Theory and Practice* (online conference webpage), 22nd-25th October 2021. Also see Mathijs van de Sande, *Prefigurative Democracy: Protest, Social Movements and the Political Institution of Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 10.

8 For a discussion of prefiguration's Christian roots, see: Uri Gordon, 'Prefigurative Politics between Ethical Practice and Absent Promise', *Political Studies* 66, no. 2 (2018): 521–37. Political scientist Carl Boggs is widely credited as the first to directly discuss prefiguration as a mode of political praxis in the late 1970s – see: Carl Boggs, 'Marxism, prefigurative communism and the problem of worker's control', *Radical America* 11, no.6 (1977): 99-122. Another oft-cited early example is social theorist Wini Breines, who described the approach of the so-called New Left and related student movements of the 1960s as prefigurative – see: Wini Breines, 'Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels' "Iron Law"', *Social Problems* 27, no.4 (1980): 419-29.

primarily descriptive, more so than prescriptive, so I will not concern myself with assessing the (underdetermined) 'ideological content'[9] nor, for that matter, the potential efficacy, scalability, and shortcomings of prefiguration,[10] as with understanding its pragmatic logic.

Prefiguration describes a principle for social and political organisation that is frequently invoked as 'activist common sense',[11] together with other allied notions such as direct action, and linked to diverse anarchist and autonomist traditions and practices. These typically include insurgent social revolutions such as those of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and of the Rojava administration in Northern Syria, mass mobilisations and grassroots initiatives in the Global North like Occupy, and experimental encampments (whether temporary or permanent) like the ZAD (Zone à défendre) of Notre-Dames-des-Landes in France and the CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) in Seattle, US. Prefiguration is often summed up through reference to the motto "building a new world in the shell of the old", attributed to syndicalist unions such as the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies). Political philosopher Mathijs van de Sande's analysis might be a helpful place to start grappling more concretely with what this slogan might actually mean in practice. Van de Sande has proposed a definition of prefiguration as referring to

> a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the "here and now", rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future. Thus, in prefigurative practices, the means applied are deemed to embody or "mirror" the ends one strives to realise.[12]

9 Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 36.

10 For a brief and thought-provoking summary of key critical questions on prefiguration, see Lara Monticelli, 'Introduction', in Lara Monticelli (ed.), *The Future is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 5-6.

11 Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, *Acting as If*.

12 Mathijs van de Sande, 'The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square – An

This leads van de Sande to suggest that prefiguration *tends* to comprise three key elements. First, a bridging (or perhaps, as we will see, even a collapse) of the temporal gulf between future vision and present action. This is to say that prefiguration entails an immediate enactment or 'real-time realisation in practice'[13] of alternatives to the current state of things – 'however tentative and contorted'[14] such alternatives might be – thus directly embodying rather than deferring values and systems of relating belonging to a social configuration that is otherwise yet to come. (One obvious example of this are the myriad mutual aid initiatives around the world that seek to de-commodify, de-professionalise, and reconfigure predominantly service-based provisions of care and assistance by instead re-socialising and re-distributing, usually at the neighbourhood or workplace level, direct participation in these aspects of our lives.) However, van de Sande also contends that this should not be simplistically 'confused with the realisation of a political programme formulated prior to its implementation', not least because the shape of such a social configuration is not rigidly postulated but instead 'continuously subjected to ... reformulation'.[15] Which takes us to a second key aspect: prefiguration usually indicates an 'inherently experimental and experiential practice'.[16] It is therefore best understood as an exploratory and potentially even open-ended way of operating that anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh characterises as 'more concerned with creating than predicting'.[17] This way, different modes of relating, doing, and sensing are not simply theorised, explained, described, imagined as a future goal: they are instead

Alternative Perspective on the 2011 Revolutions', *Res Publica* 19, no. 3 (2013): 230.

13 van de Sande, 'Prefigurative Politics', 231.

14 Milstein cited in Gordon, 'Prefigurative Politics', 524.

15 van de Sande, 'Prefigurative Politics', 232.

16 van de Sande, 'Prefigurative Politics', 232.

17 Marianne Maeckelbergh, 'Doing Is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement', *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): 16.

pragmatically rehearsed 'by actively setting up alternative structures so that people can *experience* for themselves what is possible',[18] if only momentarily. As a result, Maeckelbergh notes, prefigurative are those practices that deliberately de-emphasise the mechanistic evaluation of an action's strategic efficacy (e.g. Theory of Change), the attainment of fixed results, and are instead primarily concerned with the exploration of new processes, with 'questions of *how*'.[19] (In keeping with the previous example, mutual aid initiatives might be envisioned by those engaged in them not just as solutions to this or that problem, but also as lived and rooted explorations of what taking care of each other outwith the mediation of bureaucratic or market-based forces might look and feel like). Third and last element in van de Sande's analysis: prefiguration names a mode of practice whereby '*no clear qualitative difference* between means and ends' can or ought to be made.[20] This aspect essentially stems from a rejection of the consequentialist idea that the righteousness of a given action is to be assessed solely on the basis of its consequences and therefore that, if the end always justifies the means, freedom may be legitimately achieved through coercion and authoritarianism. By contrast, in prefigurative efforts the principles characterising a desired social configuration must be integral to the activities that are meant to bring it into being. (Staying with the case of mutual aid initiatives, this is to underscore that a prefigurative approach would take the collectivisation of assistance staged by these experiments not simply as one way to reach the external goal of providing aid. Or, put differently, a principle of reciprocity is what they at once require and bring about, so that mutuality and aid *taken together* are what is at stake, without either taking precedence over the other. This is well summed up by political theorist Dan Swain, who writes that 'for prefigurative politics, no practice is "just" a tactic but always has significance in its own right.')[21]

18 Maeckelbergh, 'Doing Is Believing', 16-7.

19 Maeckelbergh, 'Doing Is Believing', 16.

20 van de Sande, 'Prefigurative Politics', 232.

21 Dan Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet: Present and Future in Prefigurative Politics',

Now, the expanded field of design is no stranger to ideas and practices of prefiguration – although I would argue that, on the whole, this is still a fairly fringe concept amongst designers and design researchers. To name a few important precedents: Tony Fry has repeatedly used the term to discuss the inherently political nature of design's 'redirective' power;[22] Jilly Traganou's ethnographic studies of the materiality of Christiania Freetown in Copenhagen and of the Standing Rock encampment against the Dakota Access Pipeline project understand these celebrated examples of prefiguration as 'site[s] of proto-design';[23] and, perhaps most incisively of all, Mariam Asad and Carl DiSalvo have both directly reflected on the possible and actual intersections between (critical) design practices and prefigurative approaches to social justice and participatory citizenship.[24] Moreover, Arturo Escobar's formulation of Pluriversal Design could arguably be read as a poignant reminder that the entire existence of those peoples living (and designing) outside of and often in direct antagonism towards the dominant narrow terms of Western coloniality – and, because of that affront, systemically marked for marginalisation and disciplining, when not annihilation – essentially consists in experiments that 'prefigure potential worlds to come'.[25] Besides, as Alix Gerber compellingly remarked, a broader argument might perhaps be made that, 'If we think of design as "changing existing situations into preferred ones" as Herbert Simon describes it (1969),

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Political Studies 67, no.1 (2019): 49.

22 E.g., Fry, *Design Futuring*.

23 Jilly Traganou, 'The Paradox of the Commons: The Spatial Politics of Prefiguration in the Case of Christiania Freetown', in *The Future is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics*, ed. Lara Monticelli (Bristol: Bristol UP, 2022), 144-60; Jilly Traganou, 'Learning from the Standing Rock as a site for transformative intercultural pedagogy', in Regine Halter and Catherine Walthard (eds.), *Cultural Spaces and Design: Prospects of Design Education* (Basel: Librum, 2019), 76-91.

24 Carl DiSalvo, 'Design and Prefigurative Politics', *The Journal of Design Strategies* 8, no.1 (2016): 34; Mariam Asad, 'Prefigurative Design as Method for Research Justice', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol.3, CSCW, Article 41 (November 2019), 200:1-18.

25 Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 183.

then groups engaged in prefigurative politics all do design'.[26] Likewise, Luke Yates similarly observes that prefiguration 'usually involves *intervention or consolidation in material environments*' – i.e. design's proverbial bread and butter.[27]

Against this general backdrop, let me return to the third feature discussed by van de Sande, namely the relationship between means and ends in prefigurative action. Not to be trivialised as a facile 'reformulation of cliché'd credos such as "be the change you want" or "practice what you preach"',[28] the latter is an especially salient and contested point because of its multiple interpretations and associated temporal implications – and a rather consequential one in design terms too. Moreover, as Swain convincingly argued, it is a peculiar articulation of this tension between means and ends that defines what is most distinctive about prefiguration, rather than its misleading 'classical opposition [to] *strategic* politics', for recurses to prefiguration can and often are justified in strategic terms, whether directly or indirectly.[29]

It has been pointed out that, on the one hand, many have adopted the vocabulary of prefiguration primarily in reference to horizontal and democratic methods of decision-making, organisational processes, or even institution-building efforts, especially in the context of (ideologically left-leaning) social justice and protest movements.[30] In this case, prefiguration is explicitly construed as an alternative *mode* of political praxis, albeit one that seeks to break

26 Alix Gerber, 'Prefigurative Politics and Design', *Proceedings of the 2021 Pivot Conference, OCAD University* (July 2021), 59.

27 Yates, 'Rethinking Prefiguration', 14.

28 van de Sande, 'Prefigurative Politics', 233.

29 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 48.

30 For example, Raekstad and Gradin have argued that 'Many contemporary authors have continued to focus on the narrower understanding' of prefiguration as pertaining to 'formal decision-making mechanisms in mass organisation' – a perspective that is especially widespread in 'literature analysing protest movements such as Occupy and demonstrations at WTO, G7, COP and other international summits'. Raeksted and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 30.

with politics' dominant protocols, rather than an alternative *to* politics as such. Tactics like citizens' assemblies, the so-called human microphone, decentralised and mandate-based working groups, and other ways of distributing or indeed interrogating power in political organising are adopted by movements to prefigure participatory approaches to deliberation as a 'generalised revolt against representation', its "toolbox", and its spatial settings.[31] I think that this activist perspective can very much be seen in Asad's take on "prefigurative design", for example. These attempts to collectively address certain issues through egalitarian processes so as to "mirror" the values of an egalitarian society that is yet to come refuse to qualitatively disentangle the methods and objectives of political action. However, they typically do so as in a way that clearly still maintains a *procedural* distinction between what are the means (i.e., the tactics) and what are the ends (i.e., the envisioned future configurations), regardless of how *ideologically consistent* the former might be to the latter. Moreover, here the ends are arguably predetermined to a degree, and in fact dictating the form of the means deployed to achieve them – thus significantly restricting the scope for open-ended experimentation (see van de Sande's second point above). Swain notes that this approach, which he calls 'ends-guided prefiguration', presents its practitioners with a conceptual and pragmatic 'dilemma'.[32] As he summarises it: those engaged in this kind of prefigurative politics must either 'attempt to live up to an ideal which is impossible to achieve in societies as they actually are or recognise that such an ideal is merely a goal and work towards achieving it'.[33]

Perhaps in acknowledgement of this dilemma, and as discussed for example by the likes of Wini Breines and Maeckelbergh too, on the other hand the boundaries of prefigurative action have at times been stretched to also include and indeed focus on the exploration

31 Simon Tormey, 'Occupy Wall Street: From representation to post-representation', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 5 (2012): 136.

32 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 52.

33 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 54.

of alternative social practices that, at face value, do not appear to be particularly concerned or have much to do with decision-making (or protesting) in response to specific issues. Yates observes that some prefigurative 'activities' might in fact be configured as 'additional' to, hence potentially other than, 'political mobilisation', in the traditional sense of the term.[34] The prefigurative sociality at stake in these experiments might be best understood, in Paolo Plotegher's words, as 'getting together, not necessarily with the aim of deciding something' – albeit in radically different ways – 'but as moments of "collective crystallization"'.[35] It follows that what is afforded in these moments, through these practices, might be not so much a resolution, consensus, power, new political protocols and different performances of the *kratos* in democracy, a plan of action even, but perhaps 'the chance to *feel differently*. Not only to feel different, but to feel relationships that are not ubiquitously available at present'.[36] This is a type of practice that Ann Light describes as '*affective prefiguration*' and which, she argues, design can support since it is materially 'implicated … in affecting people's sense of potential'.[37] As a side note, I think that Light's emphasis on "relationality" is absolutely key here to ward off the very concrete risk of otherwise entirely lifestylist (i.e. individualised, liberal) modes of prefiguration (i.e. feeling *personally* different, as yet another mode of separation). Anyhow, when shifting our attention away from the remit of decision-making and power-wielding in political organising, prefiguration takes us well beyond a mere *consistency* between means and ends. Because in this case 'the point is not to cast a distant goal and use it as a guide to practice in the present but to turn focus

34 Yates, 'Rethinking Prefiguration', 3.

35 Plotegher, 'What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?', 288 (emphasis added).

36 Ann Light, 'In dialogue with the more-than-human: Affective prefiguration in encounters with others', *Interactions* 30, no.4 (2023), 24 (emphasis added). A similar emphasis on the somatic dimension of prefiguration, albeit from a rather different angle, can be found in an excellent interview with Jay Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux (LABOFII) – see: Frémeaux et al., 'Rural Riots'.

37 Light, 'Affective prefiguration', 24-5.

directly to the present', Swain calls this approach 'ends-effacing prefiguration'.[38] To be clear, the suggestion is neither that no effects ever *result* from ends-effacing prefiguration, nor that ends or goals are necessarily altogether absent. Rather, the point is that, to the extent that results, goals, and ends *are* in the picture, they are to be considered as 'emerging through our lived practices'[39] rather than *guiding* them from the start. In ends-effacing prefiguration, Swain concludes, ends are 'provisional, context-specific and potentially subject to revision and critical examination in the process of their enactment', unlike in modes of ends-guided prefiguration where they are instead 'set beforehand'.[40] I hope that the reader will recognise here a logic very similar to my earlier discussion of use and its effects, but also of modes of study that aren't moved by a desire to learn and accrue credit.

A similar perspective can perhaps also be found in the oft-cited Zapatistas' motto "*preguntando caminamos*" (asking we walk): not so much asking *while* walking nor asking *in order to* walk, but rather a style or mode of moving questioningly and of questioning motionally. Asking *as* walking, walking *as* asking: an experiment not *for* but *in* or, better still, *as* (an)other mode(s) of sociality. Likewise, rather than, though hopefully complementary to, a form of prefigurative design which Asad compellingly suggests 'borrows from speculative design an emphasis on visioning' and is oriented 'towards radically different futures',[41] what has been foregrounded throughout this book is instead a mode of usely prefiguration that is resolutely anchored to the present. And this is because what has been explored here is neither imagining critically in order to use (*à la* Dunne and Raby) nor using in order to critically imagine (as with the *ProbeTools*). In other words, what I have been preoccupied with is not "what if" speculation, but an "*as* if" prefiguration of playfully attentional,

38 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 55.

39 Raeksted and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*, 40.

40 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 57.

41 Asad, 'Prefigurative Design', 9, 5.

haptic, indebted, anti- and ante-individual studious use. *Using as if not one*. A grammar of usely as-ifs is arguably prompted by the type of 'future fatigue' that Matt Ward detected in some design research milieus:[42] a wariness about experimentalisms in the present always having to refer to a probable, plausible, possible, preferable something-else yet to come, always having to be refracted through the elusive prism of a future – far or near as it might be – that we are seeking to anticipate and represent, dread or aspire to, prepare or hope for, envision and mirror. Amicably diverging here from Light's assessment, usely as-ifs therefore do look 'sideways', not forward,[43] studiously 'collapsing the future into the present' – indeed, into countless 'different presents [always] in the making'[44] – instead of simply bridging the two.[45]

SOCIAL POETICS IN THE SCENE OF STUDIOUS USE

How to join those that, by "questioningly walking", insist on not having and on not being an end? Those deserting the barrenness of the Kingdom of Ends and seeking instead to only be mutual means, finding ever-new creative, perhaps designerly ways of tapping into and deepening our shared indebtedness, circulating it against all odds, against all modes of accounting, against all efforts to individuate. Addressing this question requires moving, both figuratively and literally, a little closer to those 'Other histories, other ways of living' that, as Harney contends,

> might suggest to us that not being capable of being an end in oneself, indeed, of ever fully being oneself, is in fact a way to

42 Ward, 'A Practice of Hope, A Method of Action', 185.

43 Light, 'Affective prefiguration', 25.

44 Mike Anusas and Rachel Joy Harkness, 'Different Presents in the Making', in Rachel Charlotte Smith, Kasper Tang Vangkilde, Mette Gislev Kjærsgaard, Ton Otto, Joachim Halse, and Thomas Binder (eds.), *Design Anthropological Futures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 55.

45 Swain, 'Not Not but Not Yet', 55.

> disabuse this "oneself" delusion and place the incomplete self in the hands of others for *use*, for service, for love.[46]

It has been my wager that the scene of use offers alternative opportunities for studying this social disavowal of oneness, this repudiation of individual completeness.

Granted, minor and modest design experiments, like the one sketched out in this book, are insufficient – even a little self-indulgent, I guess – when considering our current predicament, when what seems to be so desperately needed is not episodic and fleeting moments of playfully studious sociality but a permanent, militant practicing of alternatives. But then again, I cannot help asking myself: what *is* sufficient, at this point, and where? Perhaps just as importantly: how do we collectively equip ourselves with the type of complicities and sensibilities that, I think, we ought to bring into admittedly much more urgent – if often mundane – interventions? With such questions in mind, my hope is that designing prefigurations of a studious use may contribute, however minimally, to infrastructuring orientations that 'can become diffused and can persist beyond the event that generated them'.[47]

I have tried, accordingly, to make a case for a studious use that could participate in the ongoing formulation of something that might be described, drawing on novelist Mia Couto, as a "language we don't know we know": a rule-less, chaotic, jurisgenerative, and playful language through which – hijacking the epigraph above – we no longer know whether we are using, dancing, or studying (in) our inseparable differentiation. Perhaps all three at once. A language that, however, *does* exist, whispered everywhere in the haptic vernacular of undercommon friendship. This book has attempted to supplement such a language with a few more "idioms" or coordinates, as I have called them, that are found in the unassuming grammar of use. Studious, usely undercommotion can hopefully

46 Harney et al., 'Logistics Genealogies', 100 (emphasis added).

47 Valeria Graziano, 'Towards a Theory of Prefigurative Practices', in Danjel Andersson, Mette Edvarsdsen, and Mårten Spångberg (eds.), *Post-Dance* (Stockholm: MDT, 2017), 191.

add depth to the 'sociopoetic force' carried by this language.[48] But this is a type of depth, and a type of poetics, that seeks to rescue us from introspective excavations in the name of self-knowledge. It is a kinaesthetic 'poetics of depth', in the words of Glissant, that does not plunge us further and further into the 'vertiginous extension … toward the abysses [One] carries within [One]self': instead, it drags us down from the rarefied somatic privacy of 'Inner space' and sinks us back into the expanse of social life.[49] The scene of use is thus opened up, eviscerated of its logic of intentionality, reconfigured as a pragmatic mode of recognising and studying otherwise impalpable traces of affect. At least for a moment, when implicated in a studious use, 'the individual breaks the boundaries of [its] skin and occupies the other side of [its] senses':[50] incomplete, corrupted, deformed, free, because entangled.

48 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 19.

49 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]) 24.

50 Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984): 30.

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